

**DELL**

FIRST  
EDITION

A207

Two brothers  
on a desert trail  
with a gun  
at their backs,  
the burning sun overhead,  
and the unseen,  
deadly Apaches  
on every side.

25¢

# The Blazing Land

HAL G. EVARTS





## **"Stick by me, Will,"**

*Andy Colladay said desperately.*

*Will stared at his brother, remembering all the scrapes Andy had gotten into, and out of, over the years. Women scrapes and money scrapes and gambling scrapes. Lately it was politics. But there'd never been a killing scrape, not so far.*

*"Andy," he said, "there's one thing I got to know. The talk is that maybe you killed a Yankee lieutenant last night."*

*"Me? What kind of a knothed do you take me for?" Andy's laugh came light and easy.*

*But Andy's eyes were evasive, and with a sinking of his heart Will knew the rumors were true.*



# The Blazing Land

an original Western

by Hal G. Evarts

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# **The Blazing Land**





**A**t five o'clock of a late June evening Will Colladay rode out of the hills into the dusty length of Main Street, which he still thought of by its Spanish name—*Calle Principal*. It was almost deserted, except for the military. A lone Mexican hurried past with lowered head. Most of the merchants had shuttered their store fronts. At the next corner a file of Union cavalry trotted past. The air was hot and close and sticky.

Ever since the news of Fort Sumter, blue-clad soldiers had patrolled Los Angeles in pairs. From Fort Latham and Camp Drum they had moved up to the outskirts, reminders of a Rebellion that raged two thousand miles away. In this summer of 1861 Los Angeles seethed with Confederate sympathy. But Will Colladay had never seen so many troops here at one time before.

Something's happened, he thought. Something big to kick up all this fuss. Wrong day to come to town.

He scratched himself and squinted up the street. Two dogs lay panting in the shade of a horse trough. The flag hung limp from the courthouse mast. No breath of wind stirred. The water cart creaked by from the river on its home delivery route. A brownish fog of heat haze hung over Boyle Heights. The town looked the same and smelled the same—refuse, roof tar, burning cottonwood—but the feel was different. Tense.

Will Colladay reined up to let another cavalry detachment pass. He was tall and gangly, a man of thirty-two, dressed in sweat-stained clothes and cowhide boots. He had ridden forty miles since breakfast and his face was caked with dust. It was a pleasant face, on the homely side, with gray eyes, jug handle ears and a wide mouth. Ordinarily he had a patient, heavy-lidded look, as though he seldom got quite enough sleep, all in all a man not likely to draw a second glance. But now his expression had lost its drowsy good nature.

Swinging into the livery stable, he dismounted wearily and flexed his knee joints. The hostler, an elderly Negro, hobbled out of a stall to help with his horse. "Evenin', Mr. Coll'day," he said. "You have a good ride in?"

"Why, yes, thanks, Jim," Will said. He spoke with the barest drawl, of which he was unconscious, that hinted very faintly at his Texas origin. "Warming up out in the valley though."

"Yes, sir, warming up in town too."

The old man's chuckle had an odd note, but Will just grinned. He stabled his horse here whenever he rode in for supplies, about once a month. He knew Jim to be a freed slave, but that didn't necessarily prove where his loyalties lay.

"Hot time in the ole town tonight, yessiree. Bet you ready for a frolic after eatin' that dust."

Again Will caught that strained note in the old Negro's voice. With a prickle of alarm he saw that Jim's forehead glistened with sweat. It wasn't that hot, not inside. "Jim," he said, "anybody been around asking questions?"

Jim shook his head with too much emphasis. "Questions? 'Bout you, Mr. Coll'day? Nobody. Nobody-a-tall!"

Will sighed and loosened the cinches. For a big man he moved easily, with an economy of effort that made him appear almost lazy. He had ridden for the Army as a dragoon and, until six months ago, as a civilian scout. In the years between he had tried his hand at a variety of jobs—freighting, mining, hunting. And now ranching. This

town, this Los Angeles of the brown 'dobe walls and brown secretive faces, this hotbed of intrigue, was not his town. All he wanted from it was a night's sleep.

"All right, Jim," he said. "Fill me that *morral* with oats, will you?" He lugged his saddle and blanket over to a rack, got a rag and began rubbing down the roan. He decided not to ask about the commotion out on the streets. Jim's people had their troubles too.

Less than a minute passed before a shadow lengthened on the livery floor. A sergeant with a leathery Irish face blocked the entry. "Your name Colladay, mister? Will Colladay?"

"Yup."

The sergeant stepped in, followed by two privates carrying Springfield carbines. His gaze slid over Will with professional dispatch, and Will forced another grin. "No belly gun, sergeant. Got a jackknife in my pocket."

"Come along with me, please." The sergeant's voice was correct, impersonal, but hostility flashed in his eyes.

"Can it wait five minutes?"

"No, sir, it can't."

Will shrugged, picked up his saddlebag and followed him outside. The two soldiers fell into step three paces behind. An unnatural quiet lay over the mercantile district which usually bustled with wagons and rigs at this hour. Then a rifle shot crashed out from the direction of Pound Cake Hill. In the hush that deepened around them Will murmured, "Kind of sounds like martial law."

The sergeant grunted. "You could call it a lot of things."

He led on toward a warehouse which the Army had taken over as a temporary HQ. Half a dozen soldiers lounging inside fell silent as Will entered. The sergeant stepped to an office, knocked, opened the door and saluted. "Here he is, sir. Came in ten minutes ago."

The captain who turned from a wall map was short and wiry, with close-cropped hair and a clean-shaven, deeply weather-tanned face. His eyes were red-rimmed, tired, but in the stifling heat of the room he managed somehow

to look spruce. The brass buttons on his jacket bore the cavalry "C" insignia, and a stubby pipe jutted from a jaw that was as blunt as a walnut rifle butt.

He dismissed the sergeant, shut the door and regarded Will with a wry half-humorous twist of his mouth. "How are you, Will?" he said. "How's that ranch of yours?"

"Howdy, By. Why, she's raising fifty rattlers to the acre. I can't complain."

"In town for long this trip?"

Will returned his stare with a wary respect. Over in what soon would be Arizona Territory he had served two campaigns with Byron Wingfield, then a first lieutenant. He had seen him on patrol, seen him stand off a Coyotero charge, faced him across the poker table too. A soldier's soldier, this Wingfield, one who'd learned the hard lessons of Apache warfare quickly. But this was a different war. By Wingfield hadn't marched him in here to yarn about old times.

"Not any longer than I can help," Will answered.

"Pueblo of the Angels!" Wingfield gave an explosive snort. "I wish to Lucifer we were still in Arizona, both of us. Over there a man knew what he was fighting."

"I'm not fighting," Will said. "I'm not mad at anybody. That's why I quit."

"Yes, you quit. You simply walked away from it. But I can't." Wingfield spoke without censure or animus. He tapped his pipe against his palm and said abruptly, "When did you see your brother last?"

Will had been expecting this, dreading it, but he said without hesitation, "Andy? Not since you people arrested him last month."

"Heard from him since?"

"I never mixed in Andy's politics."

"I know. But blood—if you'll pardon the phrase—is thicker than water." Wingfield rubbed his square jaw. "That damn young hothead."

"He's all of that," Will agreed. "Always has been." Early in May the U. S. Marshal had rounded up the town's more outspoken Secessionists—an editor, a state senator,

a Kentucky colonel—and imprisoned them in the government stockade at Wilmington. Among them was his younger brother, Andrew Houston Colladay, whose offense had been making inflammatory speeches in the Plaza. "But he's still a kid, for all he's twenty-nine years old."

"Treason is not a game for boys, Will. This is wartime."

"Andy just talked too much."

"He just talked. Up till now." A coldness came into the captain's voice. "Why do you suppose four companies have been searching this town since daybreak? For your kid brother, Andy, that's why."

Will sucked in his breath. "What's he done this time?"

"He broke out of the stockade. Escaped. Last night. With two other prisoners. We caught them. But Andy gave us the slip. We're reasonably sure he's hiding in Los Angeles. All his friends are here and—"

"And I'm here too," Will finished softly. "Is that what's stuck in your craw?"

Wingfield nodded, his eyes intent on Will's face. "I think I have the right to ask this, Will. As a friend. The Negro at the stable says you left several weeks ago for the San Fernando. Were you there last night?"

"Sure was. I'd be there now except my grub ran low. Had to ride in for beans and flour."

"You and Andy are pretty close, aren't you?"

"Not that close. I didn't help him bust out. And I don't know where he's holed up."

"But you know his habits, his friends. I'd like your help in finding him. For his own sake."

"Look, By," Will said patiently, "I been helping Andy out of scrapes since he was big enough to button his britches. This one's his lookout."

"Maybe you could persuade him to surrender," Wingfield said. "He'll listen to you."

"He never listened very good. To me, or anybody else."

"Hmmm." Wingfield worried the pipe stem around between his teeth. "Well, whatever happens, don't put family loyalty first. Don't let yourself be tempted. You understand me, Will?"

Will nodded.

"I didn't ask for this job. But I'll carry out my orders. And if I have to hunt down both the Colladay boys—I'll do that too. With every soldier in this command."

Will nodded again. By Wingfield was, he knew, a man who would do exactly what he said.

"I can't offer any deals," the captain went on. "All I can promise is that if Andy gives himself up he'll get a fair trial."

Will drew another deep breath. "Andy won't run to me for help. He knows how I feel about the South. Maybe I've been away too long. But this isn't my war. I don't give a damn."

"You won't help him, and you won't help me," Wingfield said. "So I guess that makes you neutral. Neutral as a man can be."

Will felt the first stir of anger but he kept his voice mild. "I guess it does. Smack dab on the fence."

Wingfield gazed at him thoughtfully. "It must be lonely up there. One of these days you're going to jump. You're not a neutral sort of man, Will."

"If I ever do, By, it won't be in your 'tater patch."

Wingfield gave him a brief sardonic smile and shook hands. "I'll count on that. But if you change your mind—don't wait too long."

"Not me," Will said. "I got all the troubles I can handle in the cow business."

He left the warehouse and turned toward the Bella Union, his thick brows knitted in a scowl. The thought of Andy run to earth by Yankee troops made him almost physically sick. He had told By Wingfield the truth. He hadn't a notion where Andy might be hiding. Los Angeles was a big sprawling place. But the news really hadn't surprised him too much. This bust-out was right in Andy's style. Crazy, harum-scarum wild-hair Andy Colladay, and slick as axle grease to boot. That's what neighbors had called him as a boy back in the south Texas brush country, and chuckled at his didoes. Andy Colladay, they said, could talk a Comanche out of quicksand.

Whatever Andy did he did in bang-up circus style. So you loved him and sometimes you sort of hated him. Times like now. When the last thing you needed was a ruckus with the Army.

Will slowed his long angry strides as he neared the hotel, aware of two armed soldiers posted by the door. By Wingfield wasn't missing many bets. But he hadn't told the captain everything he knew. Not about the girl. There was always a girl or two in Andy's life. Maybe Wingfield didn't know about this one yet.

Will registered at the desk and climbed the stairs to a tiny furnace of a back room, the hotel's cheapest. Kicking off his boots, he flopped on the bed and wriggled his toes through the holes in his socks. He wished he could sleep for a week. But tomorrow he'd see if the bank would stretch his credit another notch. Then he'd head back to the valley that he called home. Ride straight out of this mess. If he hung around here any longer he'd get roped and dragged in like a calf to branding.

He was dozing some while later when a board creaked in the hallway outside. Through one half-shut eye he saw a piece of paper slide under the door. Will stumbled to his feet and yanked the door open, but the hall was deserted. Rubbing his eyes, he wheeled to the room's only window. In the alley below a ragged little Mexican boy disappeared around the corner.

Gingerly Will picked up the paper, unfolded it and read, in an unmistakably female hand: *I must see you tonight. L. K.*

He groaned and crumpled the note in a ball. If he had a lick of sense he'd stay away from Andy's girl. Far away. The town was full of Union agents. There were so many, he'd heard, they took to watching each other. That they hadn't found Andy yet was a seven-day miracle.

Stripping to the waist, he shaved and scrubbed off several layers of California dirt, then put on his last clean shirt. He slicked down his long black raggedy hair, beat the dust out of his hat, slid into his wrinkled coat and frowned at the mirror. No prize, but passable for where he might be going

tonight. It wouldn't hurt, he decided, to talk to the girl. Hear what she had to say. But that's all he would do, Will promised himself. Not one thing more. Early to bed, then pull out tomorrow.

He had a ranch to run. True, there wasn't anything on it yet but grass and jackrabbits. All the same, he owned it, every sun-baked *vara*. And he meant to be there by supper time tomorrow.

Down in the dining room he ate a solitary meal, then sauntered into the lobby to read the latest issue of the *Record*. The news from the East was five weeks stale. Lincoln had called for volunteers. Lee was in retreat. There'd been a skirmish at some branch called Bull Run. Richmond would fall before September. The boys in blue, it predicted, would be home by Christmas.

Well after dark he strolled out to the street, yawning and stretching. Two soldiers still stood guard on the veranda. At a leisurely gait Will angled across the Plaza square, past the old church and into the noisy stink that was *Calle de los Negros*. Saloons and dives lined the passage for a long solid block. Here a man could buy almost anything from opium to grappo at two bits a throw. Of all the tenderloins he had seen from Natchez west—and he had seen some dandies—Nigger Alley was the hairiest.

He paused before an establishment known as the Red Ox, squinted over its slatted doors and pushed inside. Showier than its neighbors, the place had two mahogany bars and a small piano platform on which the house professor was banging away. The rest of the floor was taken up by gaming tables—faro and poker, monte for the Californios, fantan for Chinamen. Will bought a drink and elbowed across the jammed smoky room toward the faro layouts. Two of the dealers were women, one a painted old hag.

The other was Liza Kincaid—Andy's girl.

He had met her only once before, in the dark at that, and now he studied her with sudden alert interest. She had deep green eyes and a skin of faint olive tint, and her red hair, which looked to be its true color, shone like copper



under the camphene lamps. She handled the cards with strong supple fingers, calm as a cat in cream, paying no mind to the hot-eyed bettors who ogled her bare white shoulders and the swell of bosom in the low-cut yellow dress.

There was strength in her chin too, in the proud high-bridged nose, but not the hardness he had expected in her face. She looked wise and knowing and cool as damn-all, but not like any tinhorn tart from Nigger Alley. Will scratched his ear, wondering at this. Andy's taste usually ran to doe-eyed brunettes, respectable daughters of *ricos* from the other side of town. Beyond what met the eye, this Liza Kincaid must be something special.

With a start he realized he'd been staring at her openly. He looked away. But not before her eyes had locked with his for an instant, then flicked back to the table. No smile. No lifted eyebrow. No sign that she recognized him. She didn't glance up again. Flushing a little, Will edged back to the bar, where he could keep the whole house in view, and nursed along his glass of rotgut.

He was getting fidgety by the time Liza Kincaid beckoned another dealer to take her place. She left her chair, threw a shawl over her shoulders and slipped through the crowd, fending off advances with a practiced, coldly smiling ease. Will's heart began to thump. He gave her a minute, then followed outside into the night.

Men were surging up and down the alley but he caught a glimpse of yellow at the far end and ambled that way. Peering about in the darkness beyond the next street, he smelled her perfume before he saw her and then a dim shape glided from a doorway. She was taller than he remembered, level with his eyes, and automatically he lifted his hat.

Her low voice came out almost a hiss. "Not here, you fool! Somebody's watching me."

"What's he look like, ma'am?"

"I don't know. But I could feel eyes on me all evening."

Thinking of that yellow dress, Will said politely, "Maybe he was just an—uh—admirer."

A drunk lurched around the corner, bumping into them with a curse, and staggered past. The woman gripped Will's arm. "Come on!"

She led him for some distance along a rutted street to the edge of what he recognized as Sonora Town. In the deep shadows behind a pepper tree they halted. "I guess nobody followed us," she whispered.

Will got another whiff of that perfume. Smelling stuff like that could make a man careless. "You might lose your bet."

"I don't see anybody."

"Listen a bit."

He stared back at the twin rows of white-washed 'dobes. Nothing moved along the street. At first he heard only the soft cadence of Latin voices up ahead, the strum of a mandolin. Somewhere a dog barked. Beside him the woman's dress rustled with her breathing. Then a muffled footfall sounded in the dust.

She stiffened against him. Still no movement back there. No more sound. But over her shoulder he made out a blacker shadow in a doorway half a block behind. Will put his lips to her ear. "Borrow your shawl?"

"What?"

"Your shawl. I'll bring it back. You wait here. Don't move. If I'm gone too long get back to your table."

She nodded and pressed some soft material into his hand. Easing out from behind the tree, he crossed the street into the Mexican quarter. If the noise he'd heard turned out to be some harmless barefoot *pelado* he'd feel like a rabbit fool. He'd seem so to Liza Kincaid, too. But he stepped behind a tall stone cistern and waited.

For a long while he stood stump still, breathing through his nose. He couldn't know whether the man, if there was a man, would be following him or Andy's girl. He wished he'd never left the Bella Union. Right now he could be asleep in that hotel bed. He sniffed the air, smelling chili peppers hung out to dry, and an aroma of woodsmoke and frying grease. Then he smelled fresh dust. Someone was coming.

Presently a black bulky figure pit-patted to the corner. Head cocked like some pecky bird, the man peered right and left. He was not wearing a uniform. For all that, Will knew, he could be Army. Or an agent. Or some jackleg informer on the hustle for a few easy dollars. Whatever his business, he was no match for any ten-year-old Apache boy at this game. Will watched, with a sense of outraged contempt, until he hawked noisily and took an incautious backward step or two toward the cistern.

With a quick violent jerk Will looped the shawl around his throat and twisted. Yanked off his feet, the man fell against him, struggling wildly and trying to cry out. Will hit him once in the belly and the man sagged to his knees. With the side of his hand Will hit him again, a hard downward chop behind the ear. The man fell face down without a sound and lay still.

Several minutes later Will quit the maze of Sonora Town by another exit and circled back to the tree where he had left Liza Kincaid. He came up so quietly that she jumped at his touch on her arm. "Was he the only one?"

"Only one man passed here," she whispered back. "Is he—"

"Didn't stop to look," Will said. "But if he's Army they'll come looking for him right soon. How'd you find me so quick?"

"I hear a lot of things in my job." He could barely see the outline of her face but he knew she was sizing him up. Finally she said, "You're not much like Andy."

"Not much. What was it you wanted me for?"

"Andy! You've got to help him. You must!"

"Help him?" Will said. "Help him what?"

"To hide! Escape. Get away from here."

Will shook his head. "The safest place for Andy's back in that stockade."

Hands on hips, she stared at him. "You can say that? About your own brother? What kind of a cold fish are you?"

"I don't rightly know, but I do know Andy. Runnin' loose like this he's liable to get himself shot by some trigger-happy Yank. You'll oblige me by telling him so."

"And that's all you'll do for him? Pass out free advice?"

Her voice was smoking now and he leaned forward for a closer look. "My apologies, but you seem mighty set on my brother."

"You think I'd do this for just any man?" she demanded. "They arrest women too, you know. I don't suppose Andy got around to telling you. Not that it matters."

"Told me what?"

"If he hadn't been arrested we'd be married by now."

"Married?" Will blinked. Somehow he'd never thought of Andy as the settling-down breed. "That's nice."

"Nice!" Liza Kincaid threw back her head. "What a mealy-mouthed word! I know what you think of me. I saw your eyes back there." He clucked his tongue in denial, but her words kept beating at him. "You can't turn your back on him. You just can't. He needs a man to help him. And you're the only one."

"Andy sent you for me?"

"No. I haven't seen him. I don't dare. It's too dangerous now." She paused. "Haven't you heard the story going around Nigger Alley?"

"I guess not," Will said.

"They say a Union officer from the detention barracks is missing. Since last night. A lieutenant named Sumner. Now do you see?"

"I'm a country boy, ma'am. You'll have to say it plainer."

"They think he might have been killed. His uncle, General Sumner, is commanding officer of the whole Pacific Department. That's why I sent for you. On my own."

Will wet his lips. By Wingfield hadn't mentioned any missing officer. That was how Wingfield played his poker, tight and close. But it explained a thing or two. The Army wouldn't call out two hundred troops and clamp on martial law without prime reason. Say, the nephew of a two-star general.

Her fingers dug into his arm. "Maybe it's only a rumor. But if it's true—"

If it was true, Will knew, the Army would hunt him like a possum in a canebrake. Even if it was half true. But he couldn't believe that Andy was crazy fool enough to kill a Union officer. "Where's he at now?"

A shiver ran through her body. "Do you know the vineyard of Don Luis, beside the *madre zanja*? There's a pruning sled on the west bank. He sent word for me to meet him there after midnight."

Will sighed. "I can find it."

"Then you'll go to him? Promise me you'll go!"

He looked down, straining to see her face. The brightness in her eyes could be tears. This Liza Kincaid had spunk and good sense too. She wouldn't panic or fall apart. Maybe it was her gambler's blood. Andy always had been lucky with women. And Andy was the only kin he had left. "I'll go," he said.

"Thank you!" she breathed. "Oh, thank you! Shall we start now?"

"Not you. I'll go alone."

"But Andy—"

"No 'buts,'" Will said. "If you want him for a stand-up husband someday, you keep out of this."

"All right. But help him, won't you?" Her voice was a plea. "Help him, even if he's too proud to ask."

"You know him pretty well then," Will said dryly. He started away, then turned back and handed her the shawl. "But you're wrong about one thing."

"Am I?"

"You can't read every man by his eyes across a faro table. Good night, ma'am."

Eastward toward the river the town straggled off into empty fields. Will kept to shadow wherever possible. Maybe, he told himself, he might turn lucky too. If things worked out he could still make it to the ranch tomorrow. By next week he should have his well dug. Another month would see his cabin up. By early fall he'd be ready to trail in a hundred steers. For a while he'd even hoped for Andy to throw in as his partner.

Well, he'd talk to Andy now. That's all he could do. Talk. He'd speak his little piece. Because Liza Kincaid had asked him to.

Here and there light gleamed from scattered shanties and then he reached open country. He crossed a plank that bridged one of the side irrigation ditches and came to the main *zanja*. It gurgled at his feet, running bank to bank with water bound for orchards and vineyards farther south. Brush grew rank here and he ducked down as a *zanjero* walked past on his nightly round to check the control gates.

After the man had gone Will got up and turned north along the big ditch, sure that no one was following him. It was still short of midnight, and he moved slowly through the undergrowth, careful of his footing. At the edge of the vineyard he halted and peered across the rows of grape stalks at the darkened house, which crowned a rise several hundred yards away. The shed, a low, dirt-roofed 'dobe, lay to his right.

He studied it some time before looping around to a narrow doorway that faced the ditch. Hugging one wall, he called softly, "You in there, Andy?"

There was a startled hack of breath and a gun hammer clicked. "Get that thing off cock," Will said. "It's me."

"Will!" Andy poked his head out. "Ole feather foot himself. Snuck up like an Injun." He laughed and punched Will's arm. "Any blue bellies on your tail?"

Will stared at the revolver in his hand. "You fixing to shoot a few?"

"Brought it along for company." Andy slapped the butt and stuck it in the waistband of his pants. He was shorter than Will, but not much, a lithe man, graceful in his slightest movement. He had inherited their mother's rosebud mouth, her long lashes and thick auburn hair, features that in a woman would be considered pretty. But there was nothing effeminate about the stubborn chin or the black hawk eyes that could blaze up quick as tinder. For brothers, Will thought, they were remarkably unlike—and not just in looks.

He squeezed inside the shed and looked up at the faint illumination which seeped through several holes in the roof. "You sure picked yourself a hidey-hole."

"Ain't she a beaut." Andy chuckled. "But how did you get here?"

"Your girl sent me."

"Liza? Bless her wild heart. How is she?"

"She looked healthy," Will said. "Point is, who else knows about this place?"

"Oh, a friend or two I can trust. Breathe easy, Will boy. We're safe as church." Andy's teeth showed white in a grin. "And how's the big *ranchero*?"

Will stared at him, remembering all the scrapes Andy had gotten into, and out of, over the years. Women scrapes and money scrapes and gambling scrapes. Lately it was politics. But there'd never been a killing scrape, not so far. "Andy," he said, "there's one thing I got to know. The talk is that maybe you killed a lieutenant last night."

"Me?" Andy's laugh came light and easy. "Kill a Yankee officer? What kind of a knothed you take me for?"

"This one's sort of special. His uncle's the commanding general."

Andy shook his head. "Never had the pleasure."

Will let out a long-held breath. That had been the big one. For a minute he'd been scared. Real scared. "Captain Wingfield hauled me in this evening. He can't promise much, but he guarantees you a fair trial."

"Fair trial! From one of their drumhead courts?" Andy pinched his nose. "Aren't you kinda pokin' that long beak of yours in the wrong anthill?"

"The worst you'll get is a few more months in that stockade," Will said. "Likely the war'll be over before then."

"You talking surrender to me, boy?"

Watching him, Will thought of all the times he'd argued with Andy, and lost. You took Andy the way you found him, the hot and the cold, the sour along with the sweet. Even if you itched to boot his tail, because that didn't work either. But tonight, for once, he might listen, if he loved that girl enough.

"Well, are you makin' deals for me with some Yankee captain?"

"What chance you got?" Will said. "There's three thousand Federal troops down here. The country's sewed up like a madam's drawers. Turn yourself in."

"Go crawlin' back on my belly! Like a sick yellow cur!"

"Use your head, Andy. What's dear old Dixie ever done for you?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Andy froze against the wall. His breathing went in and out, in and out, like a rasp on wood. "You were born in Dixie too. And all our folks from way back. Trouble with you, you spent too long in the stinking Army. You smell Army. I never asked for any help from you."

"Leave me out of this," Will said. "But that girl, Liza. The one you're going to marry. Ever think how she feels?"

"I'll worry 'bout her. You just shag on back to that captain of yours and tell him to turn loose his dogs."

"Andy—" Will took a step toward him and stopped. He'd said it all. For nothing. There wasn't any more. And he felt a kind of queer aching emptiness that he couldn't explain and Andy wouldn't understand.

Andy was laughing at him again, laughing but keeping one hand on the revolver butt. "You know what I think? I think you got half a notion to take me in yourself. You wouldn't try that on old Andy, now would you, Will boy?"

Of a sudden Will's chest cinched up. Was that the whinny of a horse? Wigwagging Andy to set, he eased to the doorway. He peered across the swift-flowing waters of the *zanja* into a jungle of brush. Two sycamore trunks loomed up on the far bank like pale ghost scars. He made the corner of the shed, stared out across the vineyard. For several minutes he crouched there in scowling concentration, but the only sound was the trill of tree frogs.

Finally satisfied, he slipped back into the shed. "What was it?" Andy whispered.

"Horse, I thought."

"Hell, Don Luis keeps a stableful on that hill. You're all spooked up."



He swung his full attention back to Andy again. Squatting out there he'd had some time to clear his mind. He didn't know how he knew, but somehow he did know. Andy had lied to him. It wouldn't be the first time. And right then that scary feel coiled up in his middle again. He said softly, "Where'd you get that revolver?"

"From a friend."

"What friend?"

Andy shrugged. "Fellow I know."

Will stretched out a hand. "Let's take a look."

"Go on," Andy said. "Clear outta here. Take your high an' mighty—"

Will's arm snaked out. One big bony hand grabbed Andy's wrist. With his other he snatched the gun from Andy's waistband, then shoved him back against the wall. The feel and heft told him what he should have guessed in the first place. It was a Colt Army .44, 1860 Model. Single action, eight-inch barrel, three pounds of Mr. Sam Colt's latest. About the only men who carried them in southern California this year of grace were U. S. Army officers. Not including Andy Colladay.

"That friend of yours—he wear brass buttons on his coat?"

"So now you know," Andy said. "I took it off him."

"Lordy!" Will shut his eyes. "How?"

"After we broke out the three of us split up. I dodged into some trees. It was dark. I almost tripped over this lieutenant. He tried to pull his gun."

"Go on."

"I—I hit him then. With a rock. Too hard, I reckon." Andy's voice shook a little. "I didn't mean to, but he was dead. I hid the body. I had to do it, Will. You've got to believe that."

"I believe it." Will swallowed hard. He believed it because he knew Andy. He could almost see that scene under the trees. See it and smell it and taste it, feeling the cold creep of fear. Because he was in this too now, along with Andy. Been in from the start. From the day Andy was born. "Why didn't you tell me straight off?"

The swagger came back to Andy's voice. "I don't need any lecture. I'll make out."

Will rubbed the .44 barrel with a sweaty palm. There'd be no surrender now. No light sentence for climbing the stockade fence. Andy had brained a man, a Union officer. Peacetime or wartime, that was murder. With a rope or a firing squad at the end. By Wingfield had tried to warn him.

"I want that Colt back," Andy said. "Now."

Will turned to the doorway and flung the revolver into the ditch. It made a soft splash and ripples spread outward over the star-checked water. Then he stiffened, hearing a silence that shouldn't be. The tree frogs were still. The cicadas had broken off their steady hum. How long since he'd noticed? From close by in the vinyard a voice shouted, "Come outta there, you Reb bastards! Ten seconds or we open fire!"

Will felt his throat squeeze up. Over in the corner Andy's boots squeaked once. Then silence. More silence, stretched out thin as wire. Then a second voice, By Wingfield's brassy voice, bugled, "Colladay? Will Colladay? If you're in there with your brother—sing out!"

"Why, you—" Andy sputtered for a word.

"Shut up." Will peered out the doorway, seeing only the *zanja* and the brush beyond. He'd walked into this box like a chicken to corn. Wingfield had found the place, never mind how. How many men he had out there was all that counted now. How many and where. And what he, Will Colladay, was going to do about it.

There was just one door, one way out. He could go out running, or walk out with his hands in the air. This flash-fired through his mind and then Wingfield called again, "Colladay, can you hear me? You're surrounded, man. I'll give you five seconds more."

A nerve twitched in Will's cheek. He'd caught By Wingfield in bluffs before, at ten-cent ante. And the captain was bluffing now. He hadn't moved troops up close through that yonder brush. Too thick and crackly. So one bolt hole might still be open. Surprise—he'd heard Wingfield say that too—was the best tactic in the field or at poker.

"Andy, I'll ram out first, hit the ditch. Tuck your head down and follow me."

At a crouch he broke through the doorway. Three pounding strides brought him to the bank. Someone yelled and a carbine barked as he hit the water in a head-first dive. It was cold and he went down gasping, choking on a mouthful. Water boiled around him as Andy plunged in with a belly-buster splash. Then the current caught them both.

Will stretched for bottom but the ditch was too deep here. When he surfaced Andy bobbed up beside him, blowing and spitting. He heard the crackle of rifle fire, men bawling orders and running toward them through the brush. He sucked in a lungful of air and ducked under again. The current hauled him along, dragging at the soggy weight of clothes and boots, but he held his breath, held it until his chest seemed about to burst and the blood to pop his eardrums.

He came up like a gaffed flounder this time and took in deep shuddering gulps, while one hand gripped a root clump for support. Then Andy bumped against him. Will hauled him over to the bank where they clung under a mat of brush that arched overhead in a black leafy tunnel. The firing had stopped but footsteps crunched a few paces away, and a voice muttered, "Can't see nothin' in this goddam tangle."

A voice answered from the opposite bank and the two soldiers moved on, making a racket that could be heard for a hundred yards. Will wiped a gob of muck from his face. For green troops like these there was no harder target than a running figure at night. That and the brush had saved his bacon. So far. He nudged Andy and they slid out into the current again.

No talk. No sound. Paddle your feet. Float along with your nose an inch out of water. Around the bends of the big ditch, under the brush and trees, barely breathing, like a pair of half-drowned muskrats. Ride it far enough and you'll end up in Pio Pico's orchard, or Sepulveda's truck garden. If the Yanks don't spot you first.

Back in the vineyard of Don Luis, which produced some of the finest tokay in California, Captain By Wingfield was listening to his sergeant's report.

"They made it down the ditch, sir," the sergeant said. "Our lads are having a spot of trouble in that thick brush. Like jungle, it is."

By Wingfield swore. "Sergeant, are you positive that two men broke out of that shed, not one?"

"Yes, sir! No mistake. Two it was we flushed." He held out a sodden object. "Corp'ral Milligan found this snagged on a log."

Wingfield stared and swore again. Even in this light he recognized the shapeless black hat that Will Colladay had been wearing in his office.

A few hours ago he had received an anonymous tip that Andy Colladay planned a rendezvous here with some woman. He had laid his trap with all the careful skill of his experience, deploying his men in a wide perimeter so as not to frighten Andy off. But he hadn't counted on this damnable brush. Nor on the presence of Will. That puzzled him most of all.

He could not imagine why Will had chosen to take such risks for his worthless scamp of a brother. Unless—Wingfield scowled. There was still no news of the missing Lieutenant Sumner. The man had disappeared without a trace. Which left, in Wingfield's mind, only one logical conclusion. Was that why Will, between five o'clock and midnight, had changed *his* mind? In some families blood was thicker than water or money—or murder.

"Sergeant, I want the foot patrols doubled. Both banks of the *zanja*, upstream and down. The Colladays may split up or double back. You and Milligan take the mounted patrols."

"Yes, sir. We'll find th' divils. They can't go far."

The captain's teeth clamped down hard on his pipe. No use blistering his men for this. He alone was responsible. He'd let Will Colladay wriggle through his net. It wouldn't happen again. "No, they can't get far."

By sheer weight of numbers, he told himself, he was

bound to corner them. Afoot and unarmed, they hadn't a chance of escape. He wished it was anybody but Will Colladay. Blast it, he liked the man.

"That big one, sir," the sergeant said, "didn't he scout for you once? How come a man like that turns traitor?"

"Traitor?" The word had an ugly bite on Wingfield's tongue. Will Colladay a traitor? He had committed an act hostile to the government of the United States, to the law By Wingfield was sworn to uphold. For that a man could be executed. "He must've had his reasons. But don't ever let that sleepy look of his fool you, sergeant. He was the best Indian fighter in this man's Army."

Some distance below the vineyard the brush thinned out where the ditch bordered an open field. Will hoisted himself part way up the bank and parted the weeds. In a hurry he slid back into the water and tugged Andy's sleeve. They drifted down a few more yards and ducked under the decking of a wagon bridge. Within seconds horses tramped across, with a wooden thunder of planking an inch or two above their heads. Cavalry mounts, ten or twelve, Will judged.

The riders fanned out and turned upstream, their saddle leather creaking. Will sagged against a stringer and peered out. They had to leave the *zanja* before that patrol swung back. Then he saw it. Just below the bridge, water lapped at the board frame of a headgate. He hauled himself up over the top and slid down into the muck of a narrow side ditch. Andy dropped beside him.

"Keep your head down till we get across the field."

In the lead Will crawled ahead through the rocks and root tangles and ankle-deep mud. Down in this black stink of slime and rot he was shivering and sweating both. He slipped and fell to one knee, got up and stumbled on. Behind him Andy's breathing was a ropy wheeze. The ditch seemed to stretch out forever, but at last they made the field's far side and climbed up among some trees.

"Hold up," Andy gasped. "I'm beat."

"Not yet. The river's just ahead."

He prodded Andy to a lope and they threaded through a snarl of scrub oak and cut down to the bottoms. Out in the middle of the gravel bars a ribbon of river glistened in the starlight. But dead ahead two Indian washerwomen had built a fire and were beating clothes beside a pool. Will toed off his boots. No time to circle out and hunt another crossing. The patrol would spot that fire first off and come a-whooping. Soundless in his sock feet, he slipped down into the river bed.

They got past the squaws, waded the river's shallow flow and crawled out on the opposite bank before he heard the running drum of horses. He and Andy hit the dirt. Bellied down behind a boulder, they watched the patrol ride in. A corporal fired questions at the two frightened squaws, nosed around for several minutes and finally gave the command to move out. After they had gone the Indians collected their laundry and scurried off. Quiet settled over the bottoms again.

"Sweet Maria!" Andy breathed. "That was close."

"Come daylight," Will said, "it'll get closer."

"Plenty time to hole up somewhere before then."

"You got any particular somewhere in mind?"

Andy considered. "How you figure those Yankees sniffed out that shed? Followed you, I guess."

"I'll tell you how they found it. One of your Reb friends tipped 'em off. We're on our own blue lonesome now."

To Will's surprise Andy didn't boil up. "What about the ranch? We could lie up there."

Will snorted. "Where? Under a rock?"

"It's a big country. I'm not worried."

"That's 'cause you don't know By Wingfield. He never quits, that man."

"Boy, you're hard to please tonight. How'd you like to go back home for a visit?"

"Home?" Will sat up. "Me?"

"Maybe you don't know it yet," Andy said, "but you just done seceded from the Union. You've joined the Loyal Sons of the Confederacy. South Texas branch. Sort of by accident like."

Will pulled out his shirt tail and wiped some mud from his face and looked back across the bottoms. Up till now he hadn't thought much. He'd just run. But he'd crossed more than the Los Angeles River tonight. He'd crossed a boundary line, heading down a great big empty road to nowhere.

"So you're stuck with me. Same as I'm stuck with you." Andy grinned. "Kind of a shotgun wedding, so to speak."

"Texas!" Will said bitterly. "I sunk every dime I own right here."

Andy chuckled. "What's a few dimes? You can go right on raisin' cows. For Jeff Davis 'stead of old Abe Lincoln."

Will fingered his torn filthy coat, only half listening. He knew this country. He'd ridden over a parcel of it looking for cheap land to buy. He knew the roads and main trails and Army posts and mountain passes where troops would be stationed. And he knew Andy. He could find a place to hide his brother out. But after a few days or weeks Andy would turn restless, itchy for excitement or a girl or whatever, and fly the coop. Then Wingfield would grab him. Andy wouldn't be safe anywhere this side of the Rio Grande.

"There's lots of small boats around the harbor," Andy went on. "Might be we could borrow one."

Will took a deep breath. One thing you could say for Andy: he never lacked ideas. Trouble was, most of them were chancy as gunpowder. Like his notion to meet Liza Kincaid in a vineyard. "You figure to row back home?"

"Mexico's only a hundred miles down the coast."

"That's right," Will said. He didn't know when he'd made up his mind. He guessed he'd never really had a choice. "We'll try for the border. But not in any boat."

"Shouldn't be hard to lift a coupla jugheads from one of these ranches. We can make Baja in a day."

"Not that way either."

Andy stared at him. "How then? We're not goin' to bygod walk it!"

"The first ten miles we are. Get your boots on."

"Now wait," Andy said. "Which way *are* we goin'?"

"The only way we got a Chinaman's prayer. And that's not much. But it beats hangin'." Will gave him a tigerish smile. "Come on, boy. Long way to Texas."

The country beyond the river was rough and brushy, cut by dry arroyos. There were no houses but they kept to cover, on the lookout for more patrols. Will held to a steady gait, despite the misery of his feet in water-shrunk boots and the throb of his knee. Daylight wasn't too far off. Once they crossed a road and smoothed out their tracks in the soft dirt. The sky was turning gray in the east when they limped down to another trickle of a stream. Somewhere a rooster began to crow. It was the place Will remembered, or near enough.

He hunkered down among the boulders for a long drink, washed off what mud he could and brushed off his clothes. With Andy's hat aslant his head he still looked like the rag-tag end of a boozy night. Scouting up the bank, he found a dense clump of chaparral, then bedded Andy down and explained his plan. Andy was to stay there, out of sight and sound, all through the day. Till dark. Till Will came back for him.

They were halfway between Mission San Gabriel and the settlement of El Monte. There would be some back-and-forth traffic on the road near by. For Andy it would be a long hot day without food or water, but Will couldn't think of a safer way. "Don't go prowlin' around," he said. "Don't budge out. For anything."

Andy nodded. "This man you're looking for—can you trust him?"

"A good half inch, with hobbles on. But he loves the smell of money."

"How much you got?"

Will slapped his pocket. "Three dollars cash. And some credit."

"Will—" Andy's face reddened. "I'm sorry I shoehorned you into this. I'll square it some day."

He put a hand on Andy's shoulder. From Andy that was a handsome apology. You could cuss him purple but you



couldn't stay mad long. "Who wants to die rich? See you tonight."

After Will had gone striding down the stream bed Andy closed his eyes. He hadn't slept for hours but he wasn't sleepy now. Too nerved up. And hungry as a bitch wolf. After a while the rooster quit and some hens set up their gabble. Woodsmoke from a breakfast fire tickled his nose. In the distance the mission bells began their mellow tolling.

The early morning sun felt warm on his neck and he rolled over and peered out. Upstream, beyond a fringe of cottonwoods, the mission bell tower reared up. Closer in was a field of tall green corn, their tassels stirring in the breeze. One of the mission fields, he guessed, because an Indian was leaning on a hoe at the far end. Andy's stomach rumbled and he licked the corner of his mouth. He hadn't eaten anything but a handful of tortillas since the bust-out.

Easy now, he thought, easy. It's your neck Will's tryin' to save. But you had a belly too, a belly growling for food. And Will wouldn't have to know.

He looked upstream and down, saw only the Indian with his back turned. On hands and knees Andy crawled out. Ten minutes later he was back in his thicket with an arm-load of ears. He ripped off the husks and crunched down on the sweet juicy kernels, chomping and cramming his mouth full. The corn was only half ripe but it stilled the grumble in his gut and afterward he buried the cobs under some rocks.

Now a figure was moving along the road, a man in a floppy hat riding a burro. Then he recognized it for a priest, and the idea hit him. Safe as church. Andy wiped his lips and grinned.

He hadn't meant to kill that young lieutenant. For a while he'd felt terrible. But this was war and you fought the enemy where you found him. The lieutenant had been a casualty of war. But poor old Will— He'd yanked the rug right out from under Will. Will was broke and borrowed up to here to pay for the ranch. Three measly dollars in his

jeans! They needed money, needed it bad and right now. This would be his, Andy's, contribution to the cause. He could hardly wait to see the surprise on old Will's face.

As the priest jogged down to ford the creek, Andy stepped out. He couldn't trust his own friends, but he could this stranger, a man of God. In his string-halt Spanish he called, "*Padre, por favor—*"

The priest reined up and turned a round curious face. "I speak English, young man. What is it?"

Andy felt the shrewd eyes travel over him, and stammered.

"Are you in trouble, my son?"

"A little, father. I'd like to ask a favor. Are you goin' to the pueblo?"

The priest gave his black cassock a hitch. "I am. For a high noon altar service in the Church of the Plaza."

"Can you deliver a message for me, on the quiet?"

"You are of our faith? I thought not." The priest broke into a smile. "A message to a young lady. Am I right?"

"That's it, father."

Presently the priest rode on. Andy crawled back into the brush and fell dead asleep.

Half an hour's walk brought Will to the scatter of 'dobes that made up El Monte. It was a grubby little place, mostly cheap cantinas, and deadfalls whose patrons, for one reason or another, did not care to be seen in Los Angeles. The "El Monte Boys," as its residents were called, had no known politics beyond the fast and sometimes violent dollar. The rumor went that any man on the dodge could buy, for a price, a night's lodging and a horse. For what he wanted, Will knew, the price would come sky high.

From behind some trees he studied the single dusty street. The only visible occupant stood in the second doorway opposite, relieving himself into the roadway. As Will angled forward the man buttoned his fly and withdrew swiftly. Will followed him into a small airless room that reeked of stale cigar smoke and last night's '*guardiente*. By the time his eyes adjusted to the dimness the man

was leaning against the bar paring his nails with an eight-inch knife.

"Morning, Chili," he said. "Too early for business?"

Chili might have been a mixture of many strains, mostly Indian. He was a paunchy bear of a man with lank black hair and a pockmarked face. His muddy eyes indexed Will in one stolid look. "What kind of business, *señor*?"

"This and that. Is Mase Rett around?"

"Rett?" Chili rolled the word on his tongue like a drop of honey. "Is not to know, *señor*. My regret."

"Pardon me," Will said. "*Mister* Chili. Your regret is my regret. Just go tell him the Army'll be here any time now, ripping his shanty town off the hinges again."

Chili pondered this, fondling his knife, then opened a door in the rear wall and hissed a few quick words. A woman giggled, feet pattered on the floor, and after a wait of several minutes a young man stepped into the room. His glance shifted over Will to the street door beyond, and he ran a hand through his haystack of yellow hair.

"Damn you to hell, Chili," he said. "I told you a dozen times to knock."

Chili spat and poured himself a drink.

The young man scowled at Will. "Well?"

"You too busy to make a thousand dollars?" Will said. "Or is Rett got so rich he's retired?"

"I'm his partner—Ollie Noon." He ran his tongue over his lips. "You say a thousand dollars?"

Will nodded. This Ollie Noon was dressed in a pair of pants, a cartridge belt and two full holsters. On most men they'd have looked plain silly, those twin Starr .44's, but not on Ollie Noon. He was bantam-sized, a head shorter than Will, with one blue and one brown eye—both sullen-mean. Not much over twenty and ornery as a javelina, Will allowed. "Like I told friend Chili, the Army's on my tail. Do I see Rett, or take my trade across the street?"

"Maybe," said Ollie Noon.

He disappeared through the rear door again, leaving Will to wait some more with the silent, watchful Chili. When he returned he bobbed his head and Will followed

him across an enclosed compound to a room out back. This one was dirt-floored too but it had some fancy furniture—a liquor cabinet, desk, a marble-topped washstand, in front of which a man was shaving.

Mason Rett wiped lather from his jowls and regarded Will's reflection in his mirror. He took a good long look, went on scraping with his razor, finished that and then kneaded his scalp. From a bottle he poured some scented water on his hair and combed it this way and that, while Ollie Noon fidgeted from foot to foot. Will sat down on one corner of the desk.

"Part her a mite to the left, Mase," he said. "Your bald spot's showin'."

"That greaser barber," Rett said. "Give him a sickle, he couldn't cut grass."

Mason Rett was one of the tallest men Will had ever seen outside a freak tent, pushing six and a half feet. He was whip-lean without being scrawny, and he had a streak of white down the middle of his black hair where a Chiricahua arrow had grazed his skull. Put a man in mind of a skunk. A yellow-eyed, rose-smelling skunk. Especially if he knew as much of Mase Rett's private history as Will did. "Nice spread you have here."

"It's homey," Rett said. "But I wasn't hardly expecting you for breakfast."

"Hard times, Mase. Hard all over. And there's no bounty on my carcass, either, if that's what you're hopin'."

"Mainly I'm curious. What's the Army want you for?"

"You don't care. Not if there's money in it."

Rett turned from his mirror with a saw-blade smile. "All right, let's see your money."

Whenever a deserter took off over the hill the Army searched El Monte first. But Mase Rett's hatred of the military went farther back than that. He had been a teamster over near Tubac in '58 when a wagon disappeared. A certain colonel had booted him butt-over-singletree out of Arizona on the dead-sure but unprovable suspicion of peddling ammunition to the Apaches for gold. The soldier's friend, Will thought.

"Not till I know you can fill my order," Will said. On his fingers he ticked off a list of items.

Rett whistled. "Wagon, span of mules, two horses, rifles, revolvers, hundred rounds for each, three weeks' grub— You're asking for the moon. Everything's in short supply, war prices—"

"Sure," Will said, "and you'll add a hundred per cent to that. But can you deliver? By tonight?"

"Tonight?" A look passed between Rett and Ollie Noon.

"Tonight," Will said again. "Or I'm not buying."

"It'll take some real tall scroungin', Mase," Ollie Noon spoke up. "The Army's bought all the mules from here to Oregon."

"Good sound stock too," Will said. "No crowbaits."

"For a man in your shoes, Will, you're almighty picky. I might take a notion to tell you to go to hell."

"I don't think so. Not when you hear my proposition."

Rett bent over his desk with a pencil and began to figure on the back of an envelope. Finally he scratched out one sum, added a zero and looked up. With a smile as bland as butter he said, "Can't seem to pare her down a penny under two thousand. That's a lot of outfit to round up on short notice. Then there's that bonus you mentioned to Ollie. Even so, I won't show much profit."

"You want my left arm too?"

"You have a better offer?"

Will glanced at the grinning Ollie Noon. They had him where the hair was short, and knew it. "It's a deal," he said. "I'll give you a note, payable in sixty days. My ranch as security."

"Ranch?" Rett frowned. "I want cash. On the barrel head."

"The place cost me seven thousand," Will said. "Part of the Flores Grant. It's worth double that. If I don't pay you off by due date, you own thirty-five thousand acres of the best grass God ever grew. Clear title."

"Where's the stinger? You can't buy good land for twenty cents an acre."

"I did. Old Andres Flores was in a hole for cash. He'd

run up a pile of monte debts. So he sold out to a dirty gringo. Me."

"And now *you're* in a hole." Rett tapped his teeth with the pencil.

"I've already turned down ten thousand. Over fifty square miles. Water, timber, level valley land. You'll never see a bargain like it."

"I know the Flores Grant," Rett said. "For that I might be willing to gamble."

"That's no gamble. It's a stacked deck. You can't lose."

"Can't I?" Rett hesitated, then reached in a drawer for paper, ink and a quill. "Write me out an I.O.U. for three thousand dollars and sign it."

"I won't sign anything," Will said, "till I see that outfit."

"You'll sign it. And I'm giving you thirty days to pay. Not sixty."

Will winced. "That's only a month. I need more time."

"Thirty days."

"Forty-five."

"Thirty," Rett said. "Take it or get out."

It had taken him five years to save the stake that bought the ranch. Five mean, man-eating years. Sixty months. And he could lose it now in thirty days. Lose it to a hog like Mase Rett at ten cents on the dollar. For a second his inward eye held it all in bright clear sweep—the ancient oaks bearded with mistletoe, the yellow hills, the knoll where his house would stand. All the shining land that couldn't be counted in dimes or dollars either. "I'll take it," he said.

"That's settled then. I'm riding into town now. To the courthouse. To check your title with a curry comb. *Comprendo?*"

Will nodded. "Better use both hands. Your left might cross up your right."

Rett laughed. "I got 'em trained. And when I come back I'm bringing a lawyer. He'll draw up a transfer of deed." He handed the envelope to Ollie Noon. "Here's his list, Ollie. While I'm gone start a couple of the boys on it. You'll have to work fast."

Noon turned to the door but Chili stuck his head in first, panting some. "Soldiers coming!"

Rett scissored around the desk on his stork legs. Shoving aside the washstand with one powerful push, he lifted a dirt-covered trap door in the floor. A ladder led downward into a black hole. He motioned Will. "Crawl in there. It's safe. Unless I find out you lied to me. We don't like liars, do we, Ollie?"

"No, sir, Mase," Ollie said, "we purely don't, an' that's a fact. Mr. Colladay better be sure. Double damn sure."

Will climbed down. The trap clunked shut over his head and someone wrestled the stand back into place. No light leaked in. His feet touched the floor and he groped around four dirt walls, finding he was in a cellar about ten feet square. There was a single bunk and somewhere an unseen vent that let in air. This would be Rett's guest accommodation for well-heeled gents.

He couldn't hear a sound above. These old adobes were solidly built. The Army would hunt a long time before they found that trap door. Will stretched out on the bunk. He was dog-tired of running and sick-tired of himself. His eyes closed.

Sometime later a scratching noise jerked him awake. He gave a kick, and some mouse or rat squealed and scampered for a hole. Feeling his way to the ladder, Will looked up, then climbed three rungs till his head bumped a board. Still no sound upstairs, no crack of light. He bunched his shoulders and pushed but the door didn't give. Mase Rett had him boxed in tighter than the Army.

It was Chili who finally opened the hole and called him. The soldiers were gone. Will climbed out into Rett's office and blinked into a scone of candles. Daylight was long gone too. He'd slept twelve straight hours, and done without a meal for twice that. But one whiff of Chili's fiery breath decided him not to ask for supper. "How many soldiers?"

Chili's face screwed up. "Many, *señor*. Also a cap-i-tan. He will be back, I think."

Out in the compound Rett stood with a lantern while

two Mexicans finished loading gear in a light wagon. Ollie Noon was nowhere in sight. Rett cocked an eyebrow at Will and said, "How's that for service?"

Will inspected the team first, two sound-looking, sad-eyed mules with freshly vented USA brands. Of the horses, one was a rangy claybank, the other a ewe-necked roan. He'd seen worse; he'd seen better too, a lot better. He kicked the wagon fellies, tested the hubs for grease and rocked the frame. Then he crawled inside and went over the gear—weapons, saddles, water barrel, food. When he climbed back out he examined all four animals again from muzzle to rump.

"You're a suspicious sonofabitch," Rett said.

"Where's your lawyer, Mase?"

Back in the office a plump, sweat-nervous little man jumped up from the desk. Rett didn't introduce him. He said, "The price has gone up a thousand since this morning. It's four now, instead of three."

Will stared at him.

"I learned something in town today, Will. It's Andy they want. Isn't your brother worth an extra thousand?"

"We made a deal."

"We talked a deal. But you wouldn't sign. Time's a-wasting."

Will swallowed. "Takes a sonofabitch to trim one," he said. "Trot out your deed."

With shaking hands the lawyer passed him a paper. Will read it over: a promissory note in the amount of four thousand dollars, payable in specie to Mason Rett, Esq., on the date of August 1, *anno domini* 1861, and secured in perpetuity by that portion of the Flores Grant deeded to one William Colladay. It sounded as final as death. But this was Andy's safe-conduct to the border. He grabbed up a quill and slashed his signature.

Outside again he tied the two horses to the wagon tailgate, climbed up to the seat and unwound the lines. Rett swung open the compound gate. "No hard luck, Will. But I won't be sorry if you don't get back. Ever."



"I'll be back, Mase. In thirty days. And don't let me find you campin' on my land."

Hawing at his mules, he rolled down the El Monte road into the night.

No moonlight bathed the land, for which Will gave thanks. But that could work both ways. From here on he'd have to watch his hind trail every mortal second. Around the next bend he sawed to a stop and waited in the blackness under some trees, but no one approached along the road from either direction. After several minutes he drove on to the ford, climbed up the far bank and halted again beside the brush clump where he'd left Andy a long day ago.

He gave a soft low whistle. Nothing stirred in the chaparral. Frowning, he whistled a little louder. The silence threaded out. This was the spot, no mistake. But where was Andy? Had the Feds tracked him after all? Or had Andy gotten wringy after all this wait and wandered off somewhere? Or maybe he was dead asleep in there. Will wiped a sleeve across his forehead and peered back toward El Monte. All quiet there too, and black as ink.

He risked a hail. "Andy!"

From the roadside a husky voice whispered almost in his ear. "Will? Will Colladay, is that you?"

He gave a violent start. The dark shape that had slipped up on his flank looked to be a blanket squaw, barefoot in the dust, peering up at him from under her hood. But now he placed the voice.

"Don't you recognize me? It's me—Liza. Liza Kincaid."

He was shaking so he could hardly work his jaws. "Christ Jesus!"

She stared at him, tall and straight and unmoving, hands clutching the ragged blanket at her breast. The faint uncertain smile on her lips, which he could barely make out, faded and died. "Andy's waiting for us at the mission," she said. "I thought he'd be safer there."

"*You* thought? Safer?" Will scaled his roar down to a growl. "How did you get here?"

"Andy sent for me. We're going to be married."

"Married? Tonight?" Will's mouth hung open. "At the mission?"

Liza Kincaid nodded. "Naturally Andy wants you there as witness. The ceremony won't take long."

"Who's givin' the bride away? Old Gen'ral Sumner?"

"That's not very funny."

Will sucked in a deep breath. "Miss—"

"Missus," she corrected him. "I'm a widow."

"Ma'am, then—" He'd been kicked in the belly by a mule once. He felt some like that now. Dizzy and winded and shaken to the bowels. But mad too. Mainly mad. Mad at that tomcat Andy. And mad at this woman, who sure 'nough had a mind of her own. "Ma'am," he said, "you'll be a widow twice if you tie up with Andy. They'll stick to you like ticks on a hound."

"Nobody followed me."

"That's what you said last night."

"You don't believe that I betrayed you?" she demanded.

No, he didn't believe that. But he couldn't sit here jawing by the roadside. By sunup he'd counted on being forty miles or more beyond El Monte, as far as he could get from By Wingfield's troops.

"Mr. Colladay," she said, "I'm in love with your brother. This may seem strange to you, but it happens to be true. So give me credit, please, for some intelligence. I promise you that no one else knows where he's hiding except the priest."

"What priest?"

The padre from San Gabriel, she explained. A kindly sympathetic soul, he had sought her out in Los Angeles today with Andy's message. With his help and disguised as a squaw, she had ridden out of town on his burro, right under the noses of the cavalry. After dark she had met Andy at the mission, then come on here to wait for Will.

"I don't know much about church," he said, "but don't you have to post banns, all that?"

"Catholics do, yes. But the father has a friend, a J.P., who will perform the service in the vestry. We don't even need a license."

"This padre, he know who Andy is?"

"A man of God, surely you'd trust him?"

"It's Andy I don't trust. Hate to disappoint a lady but you can't marry him."

"Why can't I?"

"Because—"

"Because I'm not good enough for him?" she said wickedly. "Is that it? Because I work in a gambling house? Because you think I entertain men in my room?"

Will groaned. "I don't care who he marries! But you—" He broke off abruptly. From up the road a piece came the squeal of ungreased axles. Leaning down, he grabbed her by the wrist. "Climb up here!"

She snatched a bundle by her feet and swung up beside him on the wagon seat with quick light grace. He reached behind him under the canvas and lifted out one of the two brand new Sharps, loaded it and laid it across his knee. Then he clucked to the mules and they pulled slowly away from the ford. The screech of axles drew steadily nearer until a *carreta* piled high with stinking hides lumbered by. They scraped past, hub to hub on the narrow road. From atop his load the driver called sleepily, "*Noches, señor, señora,*" and Will mumbled "*Noches,*" in reply.

Once the *carreta* had disappeared across the stream he urged the mules to a trot. Sooner or later that Mexican was bound to report seeing a gringo wagon on the El Monte road after dark. Then the hunt would point this way. And here she sat, this woman, Andy's woman, like she was going for a Sunday spin around the park. He shifted the rifle and glanced sideways at her profile. Women, he thought. Blue saltpeter!

"Andy told me you were married once."

He nodded. "Long time ago."

"What happened to her?" When he didn't answer she went on, "Then maybe you can understand how Andy and I feel. The war may drag on for years. We want to be together."

"You can't go with him."

"But I am going. To Texas. Mexico. Wherever my man

goes, I'm going too." She touched the bundle in her lap. "Some extra clothes, a little money. I'm a camp-follower now."

Will's jaw set.

"Weren't you ever in love?" she said. "When nothing else mattered so much? Or were you always practical and cold-blooded, figuring the odds?"

Harshly he said, "That was different. This is wartime now. I didn't have a rope around my neck like Andy."

"Then all the more reason. I'll make him happy, or do my best."

"But what can Andy do for you? I wouldn't drag a digger squaw across that desert in summertime. Sure not my wife."

"Since you're so frank—" A bleak little smile came back to her lips. "All right. I'm a gambler. A good one. But it's hard for women like me to make a decent marriage. We're branded. That's what Andy can do for me. Give me his name. I may not have another chance. And I don't think you'll stop me."

He stared at her in growing wonder, tinged with wary admiration. This Liza looked to be a soft sweet armful, but her insides must be tough as whang leather. A scheming hussy, his Ma would have called her, a Jezebel. "You know what you want, I'll say that much."

"And how to get it," she said. "In my world a woman has to fight. It's dog eat dog in Nigger Alley. Andy's my one-way ticket out. Does that shock your prudish soul, Mr. Colladay?"

"You can't win 'em all, ma'am."

"We'll see," she murmured.

They passed several fields of corn and an orchard, then the buildings of San Gabriel loomed up, topped by the mission tower. Will wheeled the wagon off the road behind some sycamores and stepped down. "Wait here. I'll fetch Andy."

Before she could argue he moved off through the trees, following a path that led to a clearing. Already this delay had cost him nearly an hour but he scrooched down behind

a trunk and waited some more, studying the approach to the church. The buildings were dark, silent. Presently an altar boy shuffled by in his white vestment. Somewhere an owl hooted. If By Wingfield had set another trap, Will decided, he'd done a first-rate job.

All the same Will circled to his right and sidled along from wall to wall as he worked in to the mission proper. He paused, pushed open the massive brass-studded door. An odor of burning incense and ancient dust swept over him. Up front two sisters in black knelt at prayer before a candle-lit figure of the Virgin. Then a shadowy, bare-headed man emerged from the nave to his left. Will caught his eye, nodded, and Andy slipped out through the door behind him.

Outside in the night again he swung around to face his brother. "You got the wagon?" Andy said.

"I got it. Likewise your girl."

"Bring her in then, pronto. The preacher's waiting."

"Maybe he'll wait," Will said. "I won't."

Andy chuckled. "What'samatter, boy? You bashful?"

"Andy," Will said between his teeth. "Andy, give it to me straight. You really want this girl bad enough to haul her clear to Texas?"

"Sure I do. Marrying her, ain't I?"

"You won't go without her?"

"I won't leave her behind."

Maybe this was Andy's own idea. Maybe the woman had put him up to it. No matter now, Will thought grimly. He'd lost this one to love and Liza Kincaid. Andy wouldn't budge. So it was both of them or nothing.

"I know, you think I'm crazy," Andy said. "But takin' her along makes sense. She brought her money. Over five hundred in gold. We'll need that to get us home."

"We're not running a stage line. She's five hundred dollars' worth of trouble."

"What you so sour about?" Andy stared at him. "Come on, wish me luck. I might let you kiss the bride."

Will grunted and led him back through the sycamores to the wagon. Liza hopped down from the seat and ran to

Andy. She slipped into his arms. "Andy, oh, Andy, darling!"

Churned by a strange emotion, Will watched them a second, then got his Sharps and looked off through the trees, up and down the road. A horse had stamped near by. One of his? He thought so. Still, it was hard to tell. Ears straining, he edged forward. Last night, at the vineyard he'd guessed wrong. Next time might not be so lucky. And now he had a cotton-picking woman on his hands.

"Andy, load her in the wagon."

She stepped back from him, her eyes shining and head high, as though she hadn't heard. "What?"

"Help her up," Will said. "Let's get rolling."

"But"—her voice stiffened—"we're not married yet."

"You won't be either, till you cross the border. Too risky here."

Andy turned. "You're gonna wait for this."

Will shook his head. He could feel the danger all around, closing in, ready to pounce. An itch, a hunch, intuition, whatever, he felt it crinkle up his spine. If you lived with Injuns long enough you got that way—bristle-haired. "Not inside that church."

"Now listen, boy—"

"*You* listen! One wrong move and you'll swing higher than Paddy's gander. Now climb in that wagon!"

"Maybe he's right, Andy." The woman touched Andy's arm. "We can be married in Mexico."

"No." Andy squared his shoulders. "I asked you to marry me. Here. Tonight. And we'll go through with it. Be damned to Will and the whole Union Army!"

"Get in there, Andy. You too, Mrs. Kincaid."

Andy's teeth showed white. "I'm a big boy now," he said softly, evenly. "That's an order I won't take from any man. Even you."

Will sighed. Maybe this was love, love everlasting. But every minute here was a minute lost to Wingfield. He knew Andy, jackass-stubborn; nobody knew him better. "Look!" he said. "Here comes the preacher now."

It was a hoary sucker's trick. But it worked. Andy turned to look. Will brought the rifle barrel up and down on the

back of Andy's skull in one fluid motion. There was a *thunk* and Andy crumpled face down on the dirt.

Liza stared from one to the other in stunned disbelief. With a little whimper she knelt down and cradled Andy's head in her lap. Then she looked up at Will again with fury in her eyes.

"Wasn't time to argue." He leaned the Sharps against a wheel, bent over and hoisted Andy's limp weight to his shoulder. Stepping between the two horses, he dumped him over the tailgate into the wagon. Andy groaned and lay still under the canvas. When Will turned back Liza had the rifle in both hands and the barrel pointed at his belt buckle.

They stood like that, not ten feet apart, eyeing each other. In a low passionate voice she said, "I'd like to blow your innards out."

Will wet his lips. A drop of sweat rolled down his cheek. He had a notion she could do it too, fast and sure and deadly as she'd riffle a deck of cards. But she waited now. And he waited. Not twitching a muscle, hardly breathing. Then finally she said, "Do you have any idea what tonight meant to me? What it would mean to any woman?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. Don't shame me any worse by lying."

Her voice broke. Dropping the rifle, she turned away blindly, groped to the wagon and climbed to the seat. He swung up beside her, not quite sure what she might do next. She sat there with her face buried in her hands while he shook the reins and got his team underway. If she was crying she was crying mighty quiet. You couldn't tell about a woman. Leastways he couldn't. But she'd sure never thank him for tonight.

He decided to risk the road, maybe make up some lost time. If a patrol jumped them he'd just have to cut and run. He glanced back at the roofline of San Gabriel and ribboned the mules to a spanking trot. Likely all he'd heard back there amongst the trees was some stray horse, but it relieved him to be shut of the place. Out in the open like this a man felt free again, free as the wind.

Free? Well, for now he was. But every turn of the wheels took him farther from the ranch. It lay back yonder beyond the hills, empty and waiting. You might say that was *his* bride, like. He'd left her standing by the altar, stood her up for another date. He had thirty days to come back and reclaim her. Thirty days or she went to a man he hated.

Liza stirred beside him and wiped her eyes on a corner of the blanket. "How long will it take us to reach Mexico?"

"What'd Andy tell you?"

"Not very much."

"We better get this straight then," he said. "I'm not tryin' to scare you, Mrs. Kincaid. But we're crossing the sinkhole of creation. The Mojave. In July. For a woman that'll be pure hell."

"Oh?"

"That's why I needed this much outfit. May take a week, two weeks, three. Depends. And that's mainly why I don't want you along."

"You've already made that clear."

"Have you ever been in a desert?"

She shook her head. "We—I came west around the Horn by ship. But isn't this Mojave far out of our way?"

"Four hundred miles out. But there's no troops between the mountains and the Colorado River. It's our best bet to squeak through."

"And if we do?"

"There's a one-company post—Fort Mojave. The end of nowhere. They won't be looking for us there. A supply steamer comes upriver every so often. I'll put you and Andy aboard. It's an easy ten-day run down past Fort Yuma."

"And you?" she said. "You're not going on with us?"

"No, I've got some business here. I'll be coming back."

"Won't you be arrested? For helping Andy to escape?"

He looked down into her hooded face. Blanket or shawl, she was a handsome wench. And he hadn't seen her by daylight yet. Someways he didn't blame Andy too much. "Prob'ly will. But they have to prove it first. By then you'll be in Sonora."



Her eyes held his unblinking. "I should feel grateful. For Andy at least. But you're the last man I'd pick for a brother-in-law."

He shrugged. "This won't be any honeymoon. Before we're through you'll wish you were back in Nigger Alley."

After that they rode in silence. Several times she looked in back but Andy was still unconscious. The road was deserted and they made good time, despite detouring one small settlement or two. To their left the black bulk of the San Gabriels towered up into the night sky, to their right the valley stretched off into far hills. No pinprick of light gleamed anywhere.

The country was dry, powder dusty, and it seemed a long three hours before they came to the next stream, another of the puny summer trickles that fed down from the mountains. Will rolled down through scrub oak and willows to the ford, and stopped to let the mules water. He stepped down to stretch his legs, reached under the canvas and shook Andy. Andy groaned and climbed out on rubbery legs.

Rubbing the back of his head he mumbled, "Where we at?"

"Rio Dimas, I make it. How you feel?"

"Godamighty, that wasn't any love tap."

"Didn't mean to smack you so hard."

"You suckered me good, boy." Andy gave a sickly grin. "Owe you a lump for that." He tottered over to the creek and plunged his head in the water. Liza watched from the seat, then got down and disappeared among the trees. At length Andy stood up again and wiped his face on his shirt. "What a best man you turned out to be."

"Change your mind any?" Will said.

"Aww." Andy kicked a rock with the side of his boot. "Guess it was a fool idea. Liza an' me, we got the rest of our lives. We can hold off a few more days."

"She's all woman." Will thrust out his hand. "I'm glad for you, Andy. Real glad."

"Old crochet like you needs a woman to keep him house-

broke. Liza now, whenever I get lazy, she can support me in style. Whyn't you marry up again, some rich widow with a ranch?"

Will smiled. Andy wasn't one to hold a grudge. Nor to worry his head over details. He hadn't asked yet what this outfit had cost. No use to tell him now, Will decided. One headache at a time. "Lot of sharp Yankee traders married into ranches. Us dumb Texicans, we'll have to sweat for ours."

He turned as Liza reappeared from the trees. Her bare feet gave no sound but the purposefulness of her walk made him straighten. Approaching them on the creek bank she said in a whisper, "There's a rider back along the road!"

Will's head swiveled. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Maybe two hundred yards. He didn't see me but when he saw the wagon he pulled off into the trees and stopped."

"I thought nobody followed you."

"The way you've been driving," she snapped, "a regiment could've followed us."

"Slip me that rifle." Andy held out a hand. "I'll fix his kite."

Will peered back down the road. Any rider would surely stop at the stream to water his mount, water being so uncertain along this route. But why a single rider? A scout for an Army patrol? That didn't fit either. The Army would bull right in and surround the wagon. Some loner outlaw who worked this road for strays? A *bandido* lookout? For that matter it might be some innocent merchant or farmer traveling late, cautious about coming up on a strange wagon in the dark. But until he knew he couldn't chance a shot.

Then he remembered the worn rawhide *reata* he'd seen coiled on one of the two saddles. He fished it out of the wagon and tested the *honda*. It might not snub a thousand pounds of brush-popping steer but it should hold a normal man. "Mrs. Kincaid," he whispered, "you take the wagon up the road a piece. Then turn out and wait for us. Can you manage that team?"

"I was raised on a farm." She climbed to the seat, shook the reins and the wagon crunched across the ford and up the other bank, fading from sight.

Will handed Andy the Sharps. "We've got to whipsaw this buzzard. You there, me here. If I miss with the rope shoot the horse out from under him. You got it?"

Andy nodded and slipped across the road and disappeared. There were boulders aplenty and Will crouched behind the nearest with his *reata* ready. The rattlety-bang of the wagon dwindled into silence. The only sound was the creek's faint gurgle. A mosquito droned and settled on Will's neck. He slapped it away. How long to wait? How long could he *afford* to wait? The rider might've shied away from this setup, gotten suspicious, and circled around the ford. Maybe he'd turned back. Or maybe Liza Kincaid had imagined a bogey man.

His muscles were beginning to cramp when he heard the thud of hoofbeats. Will shook out a coil in the rope. The rider came on at a slow walk, peering ahead up the road. He was a short man, faceless in the dark, and he stopped to let the horse drink about twenty feet from Will's rock. Resting his knuckles on the cante, he stood up in his stirrups and looked around. Something crawly about him, Will thought; like a cat after a bird. This one's a hunter.

Then a stone plopped into the creek from the far side of the road. That would be Andy, distracting his attention. The horse flung up its head. The man gave a start and drew his revolver. Will stood up and made his cast. Too late the man sensed danger from behind, half turned as the loop settled over his shoulders and pinned his arms. Will gave a jerk that spilled him out of the saddle with an explosive grunt. He came snarling to his feet but Will flopped him over in the dust again.

Climbing out of the brush opposite, Andy said, "Nice eye, boy. Feisty little cock, ain't he?"

The man lay unmoving in the road, staring up at them. Will picked up the revolver and bent down for a closer look. Then he saw the second gun still in its holster. "Well, now," he breathed. "Looky here what we caught."

"You know him?"

"Sure do. Andy, meet Ollie Noon. We're sort of business partners."

"Partners? Then how come he's followin' us?"

"Let's ask him," Will grabbed the front of Noon's shirt and hauled him to his feet. "You heard the man, Ollie. How come?"

Noon stood helpless and silent, black fury in his eyes.

"Oh, oh," Andy said. "Ole pussy cat got his tongue."

"Better loosen up, Ollie. We're crowded for time." Will prodded his chest with a finger. "You followed me all the way from El Monte. Why?"

Noon didn't answer. Will could feel the man's body quiver, but from rage, not fright. More like a snake than a cat, he thought, when you saw him close up. Like the rattlers he and Andy used to catch as boys back home. He still had a scar on his palm where one had struck him.

"Maybe he's got a sore throat," Andy said. "Give 'im another dally with that rope, Will."

"I'll ask you once more."

"Me and Mase," Noon blurted, "we got a lot of money tied up in you, Colladay. I came along to see that you was on the level with us."

"What money?" Andy demanded. "Who is he? I don't get this."

Will studied the sullen defiant face. Noon's explanation sounded plausible, up to a point. Except that Mase Rett would've come himself. Why send a gun-crazy kid like Noon? And then suddenly he knew why. He'd had too many other things on his mind to worry about Rett. Which had been a bad mistake. "You're lyin', Ollie. Right in your pearly teeth. Mase sent you to bushwack me, first good crack you got."

"You're off your head!"

"I was," Will said. "Way off." He'd been blind as a mole not to see this. Mase Rett didn't want him coming back. Not in thirty days or ever. Rett had even told him so. And this was how a man like Rett made sure—with a bullet in the

back. "Why didn't you shoot me there at the mission? Too close to home?"

Noon gave his whinny of a laugh. "If I set out to shoot a man it wouldn't take me no five hours."

Will stared back along the empty road, trying to think this out as Mase Rett would have figured it. Rett wouldn't want the body—his body—found anywhere near El Monte. The Army would smell a big fat rat. So most likely he'd ordered Noon to dump the Colladay boys in some quiet far-off gully and bring the outfit back. No witnesses. No trouble with the Army. A nice night's work for Ollie Noon. If Liza hadn't spotted him tailing along behind—

"You know, Andy," he said, "I owe that girl of yours an apology. Without her we'd've been coyote feed 'long about daylight. That right, Ollie?"

"Go to hell."

"Likely you'd've dry-gulched her too."

Ollie Noon spat in his face.

Will got out his bandana and slowly wiped the spittle off his chin. He'd seen one or two like Ollie Noon. Kids, with a million years of misery and hate twisting their insides. Kids who'd kill or cripple you for no good reason but the hell of it. You didn't pity them and you couldn't hate them back, because they were somehow sick. "Open your mouth, Ollie."

Noon blinked in surprise.

"Open up, or I'll pry it open."

Noon parted his jaws, spewing out profanity. Will shoved the bandana in his mouth, wadded it in, and said, "Talk any more, you'll choke. Now gimme yours, Andy."

"Look out he don't bite."

Will knotted the second bandana around the lower part of Noon's face, securely gagging him, then tied his wrists behind with the *reata*. "Get his horse," he told Andy. "We'll take him to the wagon."

"Why bother?" Andy shifted the rifle. "Nobody'll miss this sidewinder."

Will stared at his brother. Sure, that was the easy out:

Shoot him, strip him, drop him down some hole and take his horse. The body might never be found. Ollie Noon would have done the same to them. And alive Ollie Noon was going to be one nasty problem. He was thinking that right now. Will could see it in his bulging straining eyes, in the contortion of his face. Noon figured he was dead. That's why he hadn't made a better try at lying.

"Something kinda slipped your mind," he said to Andy.

"Like what?"

"Why we're here. You killed one man already. Don't let it grow on you."

Leading Noon by the rope, he walked up the road.

Shortly before daybreak Will drove the wagon off the road up a canyon and concealed it in a thick motte of scrub oak and manzanita. Through most of the day they slept, while he traded off with Andy in watching Noon. From a near-by knoll he could also watch the road. Twice during the morning and once in the afternoon small detachments of troops rode past, all east bound toward the Mormon community of San Bernadino. The only civilian traffic was an occasional horseman.

In the early dusk they ate cold rations and Will hitched up the mules while Andy climbed down to the creek to refill their canteens. He hadn't spoken to Liza since last night and as she came up to the wagon now to stow her bundle he saw that she had changed into a dress. "Not much of a trousseau, is it?" she said wryly.

In this light she looked younger, softer, not the woman he'd seen across a faro layout, and he grinned. "The least I owe you is a wedding present."

She glanced over to the tree where Noon sat roped and gagged. "That man, there's something positively evil about him. Is he really your partner, like Andy says."

"He sort of loaned me some money, him and *his* partner."

She gave Will a shrewd look. "The money to buy this wagon, the team and everything? But now he wants to shoot you in the back? Why?"

"Plain cussed orn'ry, I guess."

"When it comes to money," she said, "Andy's still a child. But I'm not, believe me. So don't put me off with some fairy tale."

Will shrugged. "No secret. If I don't come back—they collect."

"You pledged some security?"

"Chunk of land I own."

She would have questioned him further but Andy returned with the canteens then. Tossing them into the wagon, Andy peered down through the trees at the slash of road. "Mighty quiet today, seems like," he said. "Maybe they give up on us."

Will grunted. Andy looked around at him. "I been thinkin'."

"Fire away."

"Well, with Liza along things are changed some." Andy squatted down and with a twig scratched an X and several wiggly lines in the dust. "Here we are now. If we hit straight south, two good nights'd put us across the border."

"Nope."

"Why not?" Andy demanded.

"Andy," Liza said, "we made our bargain. We'll stick to it."

"I'm not takin' you across no Mojave." He turned back to Will. "And that's flat."

Andy had strapped on one of the revolvers and he stood there, his mouth set in the stubborn broody line Will knew so well. There'd be no foxing him this time. Nor next time. It looked like this trip was going to be one long showdown. "While you been in that stockade," Will said, "a hundred-odd Southerners've tried to dribble into Mexico, heading east to join up with Lee. The Army's caught 'em all but two. That's why not."

"Don't ride me, boy," Andy said. "So far I've went along. But here's where we swap saddles."

And then aid came from an unexpected source. Liza put a hand on Andy's arm. "I know you're thinking of me," she said. "But it's *you* I'm thinking of. If anything happened to you I—I don't know what I'd do."

"Hell's bells, honey! Nothing's gonna happen now."

"I won't let you gamble with your life. Not on my account."

Andy's mouth drooped and the hot wild look faded from his eyes. Liza touched his cheek with a finger. Watching her, Will felt that sense of wonder again. Give the lady her due, she knew how to handle men. Andy anyhow.

"No desert can be that bad," she went on. "I'm not so spindly I can't bear it a few days. It's our—our future, Andy. It's us."

Andy took her hand, then kissed her. "If you say so, chicken." He grinned crookedly at Will. "Looks like I'm outvoted. By my own true love."

"Lucky you picked one with brains," Will said.

"Ain't you preachy today." Andy laughed and gave Liza's bottom a playful spank. "I'll go catch up the horses."

After Andy walked off Will stood by the wagon, watching her. A faint color came into her cheeks. "I guess you're too old to learn better," she said.

"Learn what?"

"Not to order people around like a—a drill sergeant. Even when you're right." She looked him up and down. "I feel sorry for any woman ever married to you."

She turned and followed Andy. Will stared after her, then scuffed out Andy's map in the dirt. He got one of the canteens and carried it over to Ollie Noon's tree. Noon's piebald eyes had a smirky look and Will felt his face burn. Up till now he hadn't decided what to do with Noon, but now he knew.

He yanked the gag out of his mouth and untied the rope which bound his arms behind him around the trunk. Noon rubbed his wrists and got to his feet when Will gave the sign. Will thrust out the canteen. "Be a long spell till your next drink."

Noon tipped back his head and brought the canteen to his lips. He drank in greedy convulsive gulps, spilling water down his chin. He stopped once for breath, then emptied the canteen. Full, it held a quart and a half. Will stared at



him. "You know," he said, "I saw that camel outfit over at Fort Tejon once. Damn if you don't guzzle like one."

Noon wiped his mouth and belched.

Andy led up the two horses and stopped. "We're not takin' him along."

"Ollie, see the road down yonder through the trees?" Will pointed. "Where the crick cuts it. How loud can you holler?"

"Holler?"

"That's the idea," Will said. "Tomorrow somebody's bound to come along. They'll stop to water. When you see 'em—sing out. They'll climb up to hunt around. Turn you loose."

"We can't leave him like that!" Andy protested. "He'll report us to the Army."

Will shook his head. Ollie Noon wouldn't tattle, not to the Army. He'd have too much to explain, too many questions to answer. He'd make sure it was a civilian he hollered at. And by the time he got back to El Monte Will would be long gone across the mountains. "He's too smart for that. Aren't you, Ollie?"

Noon's mouth worked. He might've been relieved or scared or fixing to spit in your eye again. Will couldn't tell. But finally he said, "S'pose nobody finds me, Colladay?"

"Then you'll have to wait till I come back. You drunk enough to last you thirty days."

"Dammit, Will!" Andy exploded. "This don't make sense at all. He'd a shot the three of us."

Will turned his back on Andy. "Scrooch down against that tree, Ollie. Powwow's over."

The smirk slid back onto Noon's face. His glance lagged over to the wagon, where Liza was mounting to the seat. "I seen that woman somewhere. Now I remember. She's a dealer at the Red Ox."

Will coiled in the rope. "Siddown, boy."

Noon's smirk became a grin. "Two Reb' jailbirds and a Nigger Alley whore."

The word hung heavy in the hot still air. For a second

nobody spoke. Noon was baiting them, Will knew. Deliberately. For a reason this time. Ollie Noon *wanted* them to lash into him, one or both. But before Will could move Andy charged past.

Andy grabbed Noon's nose between two hooked fingers and gave it a vicious twist. Noon let out a yelp of pain and sank to one knee. Standing over him, his fists balled, Andy breathed, "Crawl. Over to that wagon. On your belly. Apologize to her."

Noon swiped tears from his eyes. Andy raised a foot. "Go on. Before I kick your face in."

"Andy, watch him!"

The instant Will yelled Noon made his move. It was fast, so fast it seemed to blur the eyes. Noon uncoiled out of his crouch like a striking snake. One second his hand was empty, the next it held a hideout knife, yanked from under his pant leg. As he drove upward for Andy's groin Will gave Andy a shove that knocked him sprawling.

The knife slashed empty air and Noon's lunge carried him against Andy's outthrust legs. He tripped and fell hard. With a jump Will landed on Noon's knife arm, pinning wrist to ground under a size-twelve boot. Noon wriggled once and quit.

"You're a cute one, Ollie. Got any more o' those hid out?"

Noon was too jarred to answer.

Will bent down, took the knife from his unresisting fingers. Straightening again, he hefted it and threw overhand at the trees. The blade quivered in the trunk.

Slowly Andy got to his feet, blazing red of face. "Little piss ant!"

"Better tie the horses on," Will said. "Time to roll."

Andy glowered down at the spread-eagled Noon, then stalked off toward the wagon. Will dragged Noon over to the tree, sat him down against the butt, and retied his arms. Noon didn't fight him, didn't say a word. Just stared at him out of those crazy mismatched eyes, sick with hate.

It was nearly dark before Will finished. He checked his knots and stepped back, feeling some like Andy. Only he'd

rather stake this one out in the sun, Apache fashion. Might cook some of the meanness out. "Like I told you, Noon," he said, "when you want company—holler. If a grizzly don't smell you first."

When he climbed to the wagon he glanced at Liza's face. It was ashen. How much she might've overheard he didn't want to know, and she didn't volunteer. After they had driven down canyon and turned onto the road again he could still see the look in Ollie Noon's eyes.

The road was deserted, as it had been the night before. This was not unusual; the few settlers in this isolated countryside had little occasion to travel after dark, especially since the outbreak of war. All the same Will kept a sharp lookout. Liza huddled beside him in a withdrawn silence and Andy fell asleep back in the wagon. Hour after hour the dusty miles unrolled behind them.

Well past midnight they came to the first plowed field since leaving San Gabriel. Beyond lay the even rows of a young orchard and through the trees a light or two gleamed in the distance. Will swung off to his left cross country. "San Bernadino," he said.

Liza turned on the seat, staring until the lights faded in the night. The next settlement was two hundred miles—Fort Mojave. But there wouldn't be another white woman this side of Yuma.

The second day they camped high in the foothills, resting the mules for the hard climb ahead. There was water, shade, plenty of feed, and danger seemed remote. No troops passed along the road far below.

"They'll be camped at the summit," Will told Andy. "That's Cajon Pass."

"You aim to cut around 'em?"

"Sawpit Pass, off to the east. The old trappers used it. Few years back some Mormons built a sawmill up there. If they could snake logs down we can boost a wagon up."

Andy peered up at the towering range. "She's a daisy!"

"Straight up." Will grinned. "Texas never looked like this."

They set out in late afternoon. By sundown he located the old logging road, a pair of ruts half overgrown by brush. From that point on he and Andy rode the horses, to lighten the load, while Liza drove the team. They climbed up, up, along the dizzy lip of a canyon, through a series of switchbacks into mountain mahogany and pine. Here the air was cold, almost chill, scented with sweet conifers. The track deteriorated into a barely passable trail. Again and again they had to drag down logs and timber snags out of the way to squeeze the wagon through, hack down overhanging limbs and bridge gullies with rock. It was daylight before they topped out in a meadow and reached the abandoned ruin of the mill.

The road, such as it was, ended in a pile of sawdust. They rested until noon and started off again. But half a mile beyond the mill Will stopped and got down. Fresh horse tracks led in from the west and joined the faint trail they were following. Yesterday, he judged. Six horses and three mules. It could be a party of miners or hunters. More likely it was Army, sent up from the San Bernadino garrison.

He peered up at the bald hills ahead. Already he might be under observation through a glass. On the other hand, maybe they could luck it through. "Andy!" he called. "Crawl in the wagon."

Andy did, without a fuss. Will tied the horses to the tailgate, tossed in the saddles on top of him and climbed to the seat beside Liza. "We better think up a story," he told her.

"If there's talking to be done," she said. "I'll do it. That twang of yours won't fool any Yankee."

They climbed on slowly toward a notch between the hills. Nothing to be seen up there but rocks and scorched grass, but Will was sweating. Then a small tent came into view, horses on a picket line, a pattern of blue figures. He heard Liza's sharp indrawn breath. "Andy," he called back through the canvas, "keep down under those blankets. Way down!"

As they crept on into the rocks a corporal and two troopers stepped out to block the narrow trail. Liza sawed

the mules to a halt. The corporal stared at her in some surprise, then fixed his eyes on Will. None of them, Will saw, carried a glass or binocular case.

"Where you bound, mister?"

"We're going to Deseret, soldier," Liza spoke up tartly. "My husband and I."

The corporal's gaze shifted back. "How's that, ma'am?"

"To the Salt Lake. We're Latter Day Saints."

"Saints? I'll have to search your wagon, lady."

"Oh, dear!" Liza wailed. "My husband won't like that."

"Won't, huh?" The corporal's scowl settled on Will. "What's ailing him?"

"Why," Liza said, "he won't speak to Gentiles. Took a solemn vow!"

Will almost choked. The two soldiers goggled at him. The corporal's eyes narrowed. Then an apple-cheeked second lieutenant emerged from the tent. He looked about nineteen. "What seems to be the trouble, Tulley?"

Corporal Tulley, who was old enough to be his father, saluted. "Mormons, sir. They refuse to submit to search."

The lieutenant stroked his cornsilk mustache, as though to make sure it was still there. Will held his breath. Since the ruckus with Brigham Young four years ago the Army'd been treating Mormons with kid gloves. And maybe this outpost hadn't heard of the disappearance of a certain female faro dealer yet.

"Oh, major," Liza said, smiling demurely, "I'm sure you can help us."

The lieutenant blushed, actually turned bright pink. "Lieutenant," he said. "Second Lieutenant Crowthwaite." He made a little bow. "At your service, madam."

"Lieutenant"—Liza's voice held just the right mixture of distress and pretty confusion—"I'm afraid we're lost."

Lieutenant Crowthwaite gave her a puppy dog smile. "Lost?"

"We're joining a wagon train of our brethren. They promised to wait for us beyond Cajon Pass. But somehow we missed the road."

"That's not too serious. You've only come a few miles out of your way."

"Sir." The corporal straightened. "Begging the lieutenant's pardon, but our orders were to stop and search every vehicle."

"Ah, come now, Tulley." The lieutenant dismissed him with a laugh that said the man was an unfeeling dolt. "I'll be happy to escort you part way myself, ma'am."

"Would you?" Liza's eyelids fluttered. "That's very kind, I'm sure."

"Sir!" The corporal was an old-line noncom, Will could tell; he'd learned his discipline the hard way. "Sir," the corporal grated, "those mules, they're carryin' fresh vented government brands."

"That will do, corporal," the lieutenant snapped. "Naturally you have a bill of sale, ma'am?"

"Naturally. Would you like to see it?"

She slid a hand down the front of her dress but the lieutenant said hastily. "No! Won't be necessary," and blushed again. He swung back to the corporal. "Saddle my horse, please."

The corporal stared at him a long moment. "Yezzir," he muttered, then turned smartly on his heel.

And so they rolled on through the hills and over the summit a few minutes later. The lieutenant jogged alongside the wagon next to Liza, tongue-tied, like a man bewitched. Will peered straight ahead, trying to keep a poker face. He'd forgotten that Liza Kincaid was a professional at running bluffs. It was her business, her stock in trade. She'd be a match for Andy, and then some.

But he had to pity this boy, Lieutenant Crowthwaite. By Wingfield would eat him alive. For Will never doubted that Wingfield would learn of this.

The air was hotter, drier, on the desert slope and the vegetation sparse. They dropped from the pine belt into sand and thorny brush, and presently the lieutenant halted on a point. Pointing off to the north, he said, "If you follow this valley it leads into the main road about seven miles

from here. You'll probably find your friends camped at the fork."

Liza dipped her head and smiled.

The lieutenant touched a finger to his hat brim, about to wheel away, but at last curiosity overcame his breeding. He stared at Will and said, "Is it true—I mean—I've heard—" His face was fiery and finally he blurted. "Do you really have plural wives?"

"Plural wives?" Liza said sweetly. "Yes, indéed." She pointed her chin at Will. "I'm his fifth. He has thirty-seven children by the first four."

The lieutenant's mouth sagged open.

"Good-by, lieutenant. We'll never forget your courtesy."

She shook the reins and drove on.

Before they had gone a hundred yards Andy poked his head out through the canvas, sputtering with laughter. Liza's lips thinned. "That poor baby," she said. "I feel—ashamed."

"Can't you see ole Will!" Andy gasped. "Thirty-seven kids. Yeow!"

Will craned his neck and peered back. Lieutenant Crowthwaite, sitting motionless on his horse, raised his hat and waved. "Shut up, Andy!"

"What's the matter, *Mister* Colladay?" she said. "You're not amused?"

He looked at her and quickly looked away. He didn't understand this woman. Without her they'd be under arrest this minute. She'd more than paid her way. And yet she aggravated him, always at him for this or that. Like a hornet heeling a mule. He never knew when to kick and when to jump.

"I'll laugh when I put you on that steamer," he said.

No breeze stirred and the noonday sun beat down. Far below he could make out the first spikey forms of joshua trees, the dark curving line of the river bed. The upside-down Inconstant of Jed Smith, Ewing Young and Kit Carson, the mountain men, that would be their only water for a hundred miles. Beyond stretched the desert—shimmer-

ing flats and barren ranges. The Mojave's heat closed around them.

The first civilian to pass along the Los Angeles-San Bernadino road that day was an eastbound teamster. When he stopped to water at the creek Ollie Noon yelled for help. Apparently the man didn't hear. Noon shouted again, and again, screaming in panic, until his voice went hoarse. Finally the teamster looked around, got his rifle and walked up the canyon to investigate. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when he found Ollie Noon and cut him loose.

Noon staggered down to the creek and drank and drank. Afterward he told the man that he'd been held up by two Mexicans the night before and robbed of his money and his horse. The man looked skeptical; the *bandidos* he knew about slit their victims' throats. This one, he decided, must be a little loco from too much sun. Noon, in fact, reminded him of a rabid dog he'd seen once—the red eyes and slobbery mouth. He was glad to hurry back to his wagon and get shut of him.

Noon stared after his departing dust, then westward along the empty road. There was nothing for it but to walk. He hated walking and men who had to walk. But he set out for El Monte, some forty miles away. Shortly after dawn the next day he tottered into Mason Rett's cantina and got him out of bed. His feet were so swollen that Rett had to cut off his new twenty-dollar boots with a knife. Before he collapsed he managed to get out most of his story.

Noon offered no excuses. And Rett didn't rage or curse him. Mase Rett was a realist. Will Colladay had gotten away. But the situation, as Rett saw it, was that even now Colladay had almost no chance of returning before the allotted thirty days. Not across the Mojave and back. Even the top freight outfits took six weeks for the round trip. Rett knew. He'd hauled supplies back and forth himself.

There were some puzzling angles to consider, however. Who was the woman, and why had Colladay taken her along? And what was Colladay's destination? The Sonora border eventually, of course; country he knew well. But



why take such a long way round? Was there any chance of intercepting him? And, if so, would the effort be worth the risk? Rett got out a government survey map and studied it. Then the promissory note Colladay had signed, and his quit claim to the Flores Grant. The lawyer had assured him they were airtight, legally binding in any court. He couldn't lose.

But suppose Colladay intended to guide his brother only as far as the edge of the desert? Nothing to stop him from turning back across the mountains. He might come riding in here any day now. For that matter—today. To hang onto his ranch a man like Will Colladay would risk arrest and a military trial. He had friends in the Army too. Somehow Colladay would raise that money—if he came back in time.

Rett was weighing this possibility when Chili stuck his head in the door to report that Captain Wingfield had arrived.

Wingfield pushed into the office without invitation or greeting. He stared down at Rett behind the desk with cold unfriendly eyes. Rett waved Chili out, creaked in his chair and smiled. "Morning, captain. Drink?"

By Wingfield shook his head. He was all that Rett had come to despise in the officer caste. A martinet, a stickler for the manual. A holier-than-thou, a Christer who looked down his long Yankee nose at horse traders like Mase Rett. "You tore my place apart the other day," Rett said. "But you're welcome to try again."

"Don't fence with me, Rett. I know too much about you."

"You think I'm fool enough to hide out the Colladay boys?"

"Not here," Wingfield said. "But you outfitted them."

"Prove it, captain."

"A hide hauler saw Will Colladay and a woman that night. In a wagon. Not a mile from here."

Rett shrugged. "It's a public road."

"Early this morning," Wingfield said in a voice like glass breaking, "one of my patrols found the body of Lieutenant John Sumner—the general's nephew. With the top of his

head beaten in. We've been looking for him since the night Andy Colladay escaped."

Rett's heart seemed to lurch under his shirt, but he eyed Wingfield steadily. He hadn't heard a whisper about any murdered lieutenant. If the Army tied him into that he'd be out of business, permanently. No wonder Colladay had been in such a sweat. "Found him—where?"

"In a slough near Wilmington. Weighted down by rocks." Wingfield flattened both palms on the desk in a most unmilitary manner. "Don't tell me I can't arrest you. You're halfway to the stockade now. Unless I get a few straight answers."

Rett decided to gamble. On the truth, or part of it. Selling a getaway nag to a deserter at triple its worth was one thing. Bucking a major general would be suicide. "All right, Wingfield. I did sell Colladay a wagon. That's no crime."

"Which Colladay?"

"Will. I never saw his brother."

"How did he pay you?"

Rett hesitated. "In gold."

"That explains the woman then," Wingfield said. "We've since learned she was a consort of Andy's. They needed her money." His eyes augered into Rett. "What did Will tell you?"

"Not much. He's no talker."

"I know that!" Wingfield's palm slapped the desk top like a pistol shot. "But he must've said something. Man doesn't buy a team and wagon like he would a peck of beans."

"All he said was he had to leave the country. I figured that meant Mexico."

"Then why head north from here? Instead of south?"

Rett hesitated again. How much more should he tell? The Army would bring Will Colladay back for trial. If the Army caught him. If— "I'm just guessing now," he said. "But maybe he doubled back. Tryin' to throw you off his trail."

"If I find out you're lying, Rett, I'll padlock this place of yours for good."

"Why would I do that? I try to get along with you people."

Wingfield snorted. "One other thing. The general loved that boy like a son. He has authorized me to offer a reward, out of his own pocket, of two thousand dollars. For the capture of Andy Colladay alive."

"Two thousand?" Rett's eyebrows lifted. "Alive?"

"Alive," Wingfield repeated. "The general wants to make an example of him. One the Rebels in this area won't soon forget."

"What about Will?"

"General Sumner," Wingfield said, after a pause, "will show his gratitude to anyone who brings in both Colladays."

Rett smiled. That was the nearest a granny like Wingfield would come to offering him a deal, a bribe, dangling it in front of his nose. In effect the man was promising him immunity for further information, with the possibility of Army contracts in the future, much as it cankered his righteous soul. When a superior said dance, he did the Highland fling. "You can count on me to co-operate, captain, if I learn anything more."

"I felt sure I could," Wingfield said dryly. "Good day, sir."

After he left Rett got out his map again. This time he studied it in detail. He still had Colladay's list of supplies, enough to stretch-feed two men a month. Water barrel, canteens—everything pointed to a desert crossing to the Colorado. There were three posts on the river—Mojave, Ehrenberg and the big one at Yuma. His experience told him that a man on the run, dodging the Army, would choose the least traveled, the northern trail. Noon's story confirmed this. Beyond the Colorado there was nothing but a howling wilderness for five hundred miles. So, by a process of elimination, Colladay would have to turn south for Sonora at some point below Fort Mojave. Rett could almost plot his route from waterhole to waterhole.

Leaving his office, he stepped into the next room, where Noon lay in exhausted sleep, and shook him awake. "Think real hard, Ollie," he said. "I don't want guesses. Tell me again. What they said, word for word."

"Huh?" Noon mumbled. "Whazzat?"

"Night before last, you told me, the Colladays got into an argument."

"Yeah." Noon tried to focus his bleary eyes. "Andy—he's the mouthy one."

"So you heard him. You're sure he said he wouldn't take his woman across the Mojave?"

"Sure I'm sure," Noon declared. "Then the big one shut him up."

"Maybe they were putting on an act for your benefit."

"Nah, it wasn't no act. They near fought about it. But Andy, he give in when the woman sided agin' him."

Rett made a quick mental calculation. Colladay had something like a three-day start. But Colladay would have lost part of that dodging and ducking across the mountains. And no team of mules could pull a loaded wagon more than forty miles a day in this weather. Say, eighty miles in all. By using horses in relay a man could cover the same distance in a hard day's ride.

"Ollie," he said, "how'd you like another crack at those two brothers?"

Noon sat up on the bunk, full awake. "You're not funnin' me, Mase?"

Rett shook his head. "Seems like Andy's worth more on the hoof than we figured. And Will, he's meat in the pot. All we got to do is light the fire."

A hot glow came in Noon's eyes. "I'd like that," he said. "Like it fine, yessir, I truly would. Them two jokers, I'll learn 'em not to set Ollie Noon afoot."

Rett left him to round up an outfit and walked into the cantina portion of his establishment. At this hour there were no customers. Only Chili, leaning against the bar, an innocent expression on his pitted face. Rett could smell the fumes at twenty feet.

"Chili."

**"Señor?"**

Rett watched his eyes. He had never seen the breed drunk. He had never seen him sober, either. Chili's value lay in his strength. He could lift a two-hundred-pound man over his head with both hands and throw him halfway across the road. He maintained order in the bar seven nights a week and took his wages in trade. Somewhere in his misty youth, before the American occupation, he had lived with his tribe and learned their skills at tracking.

"Chili, get Rosa to make you a pot of coffee. Drink it." Chili spread both huge hands palm upward in a gesture of puzzled hurt.

"We're goin' on a little trip," Rett said. "You and me and Ollie. When we get back you can take a bath in '*guardiente*. But touch another drop today and I'll skin you with a bullwhip."

They left El Monte shortly before sunset, each leading an extra saddle horse. Altogether six horses, picked for stamina more than speed. Rett prided himself as a judge of horseflesh. Each man carried two canteens, and in his saddlebags a week's supply of hardtack and *carne seca*. Also Rett tucked in one full quart bottle. In this country, he had discovered, whisky often packed more authority than gold.

He rode east along the main road, well aware that his departure would be reported to Captain Wingfield. At this stage he had nothing to hide from the Army. After all, wasn't he doing them a favor? Rett grinned to himself. Might even turn out to be a patriot.

Near San Bernadino they stopped to rest for a couple of hours, then switched horses and started up the pass road. Once they were stopped and questioned by a patrol. About noon they reached Cajon. Some thirty troopers had been stationed at the summit, bivouacked in tents behind a log control shack. Noon eyed the post sourly and said, "Colla-day sure didn't weasel through here."

"Never hurt to ask," Rett said.

Inside the shack he told his story to a granite-eyed first lieutenant. Two of his employees, he said, had stolen a

wagon full of supplies and lit out. He'd lost their trail down in the foothills. By any chance had the lieutenant seen them?

The lieutenant had not. His command concerned itself only with military matters. A stolen wagon fell within the province of the sheriff's office. The gentleman, he said, should take his problem to the proper authorities, and dismissed Mase Rett summarily.

Rett had learned all that he expected. Anything more would be a bonus. But he had seen enough of the Army to recognize the truth in that old service saw: Right way, wrong way and Army way. Leaving Noon and Chili with the horses he walked down a draw where a soldier was digging a trash pit.

"I'm looking for some information."

The trooper wiped his face on a blue wool sleeve and jerked a thumb at the shack. "Up there."

"Already did," Rett said.

"Not me, bucko. This here is Paradise eternal alongside that guard house."

Rett held out the quart of whisky. "Willing to take a chance for this?"

The soldier stared at the bottle, then up at the post. "All of it?"

Rett nodded. "Who's gone over the pass the last few days?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"Oh, some while back a bunch of Jayhawkers went through. Bound for home to join the fight."

"That's worth one short drink," Rett said. "How about the other posts? Don't they report in to this one?"

"Sure, every day. But—" The man's throat worked as he stared at the bottle. "Funny thing happened over at Sawpit yesterday."

"Sawpit? That's the next pass east of here."

"Nine, ten miles," the trooper said. "Mormon couple lost the trail. But that's not what you'd be paying for."

"Depends. This couple now. Man and woman, in a wagon?"

"That's it, bucko. A looker too, she was, the corp'ral claims. And you know what the man says?"

"Couldn't guess, soldier."

"Not one bloody word. Doesn't open his mouth. Won't talk to Gentiles." The soldier wet his lips. "Can you beat that!"

Rett handed him the bottle and returned to the horses. Frowning thoughtfully across the desert, he told Noon, "They're a day ahead. And the woman with 'em."

Noon grinned and gave his sagging gun belt a hitch. "We'll catch 'em up tomorrow. Her too."

The three rode on, north from Cajon Pass beside the sandy ruts. The Old Spanish trail that would lead a man to Santa Fe and ancient Taos, if he followed far enough. If he got through the Paiutes and the Navajos and the 'Paches. If the waterholes hadn't salted out.

Rett watched Noon take a long pull from a canteen. His own throat felt cotton-dry in all this dust and sun. He glanced back at the crest of the range, the cool blue line that already looked remote. Up there you could wallow in an icy creek. Maybe Chili was the lucky one. Chili took his kind of thirst wherever he went.

Two hours later they pulled up in the shade of a few cottonwoods. The Mojave River, a necklace of green scummy pools, glistened in its bed. Rett read sign along the tracked-up bottoms. Two men and a woman had stopped here, probably during the heat of the afternoon. They had eaten at least one meal, not risking a fire to warm coffee water. Then they'd gotten back in the wagon and driven on, likely last night after the desert cooled off some. He didn't need Chili to tell him that Will Colladay was pushing hard. Colladay would make this a race all the way.

Not tomorrow, Rett told himself. But somewhere this side of the Colorado.

They ate. They watered the horses and switched mounts

again. Then they rode on into the blazing heat of the Mojave.

Bitter Springs. Soda Lake. Vulture Flat. Harsh names for a harsh land, Liza Kincaid thought. A strange and sometimes frightening land, alien to anything she had known. The desert she had pictured was a waste of sandy dunes, with perhaps an occasional palm-fringed oasis. But this, the Mojave, was totally unlike the Sahara of her imagination. Even the plants were different, as weird and misshapen as the land from which they somehow wrested life.

She had lost all sense of time. The hours melted into days and the days into nights. She rode the wagon seat, snatched a few hours of sleep wherever they stopped, washed down hardtack and meat with alkali water, then rode on again. The sway of the wagon had become as natural as the pitch of a ship at sea. And, like the sea, the desert seemed boundless and empty. They hadn't passed a human being or a habitation, not even an Indian *jagal*.

How far they had traveled from the mountains Liza had no idea. She lived in an eternity of sand and rock and heat, an unreal world in which the only enemy was Will Colladay. She had come to hate him, Liza told herself, more than the desert itself. More than the Army, the shadowy figure of Captain Wingfield who might be pursuing them. For Will drove them—Andy, herself, the mules—as though they were less than animals, and himself hardest of all.

During the heat of the day they rested, if you could call it that, under a molten sun. In late afternoon they would push on, stop at dusk for a shorter rest, then harness up again to drive through the night into another searing day. Often she drove while the two men rode, Will scouting the trail ahead and Andy off to either side as a flanker or to the rear as lookout. At each halt they rotated guard, the one duty she was spared, as a concession to her sex. Even that, she suspected, was because Will didn't trust a woman to stay awake.

She watched him now as he rode back to meet her in the



dying glow of sunset, his face gray with dust, red-rimmed eyes sunk deep in their sockets. She sawed the team to a halt and started to get down but he said, "Not here. Better place ahead."

She was hot, filthy and so tired she could weep and she said with malice, "Maybe I prefer it here."

"No cover."

"Cover from what?" she demanded. "We haven't seen a sign of troops."

"I'm not thinking of troops."

"Who then?"

"Never can tell. It's only a little piece."

Glaring at his back, she followed him to where the track dipped down into a narrow dry wash, whose banks and tall creosote bushes screened the wagon. He was right, of course. Overcautious as this might seem, it made no sense to camp in the open, exposed to anyone who happened along. But it was this very competence that she found infuriating. "How far are we from the Colorado?"

"Near as I make it," Will said, "about twenty-five miles west of Fort Mojave."

"Then this may be our last night?"

"If we're lucky." He gave her a twisted smile. "Then you'll be rid of me."

"And you of me."

He went about the chores with a sleepy-seeming indolence, but within a few minutes he had the stock watered and rubbed down, while Liza gathered brush for a fire. It seemed impossible that this might be her last night on this desert. Tomorrow, once they reached the river, the worst would be over. For Andy and herself. But not for Will, unless he changed his mind. She said, "Why are you going back?"

He looked around at her. "Have to."

"But you're a Texan, like Andy. Don't you believe in the things he's fighting for?"

"I've done my fighting. All I want."

She stared at him, wondering what kind of man he really was. Andy had told her very little and Will himself had

told her almost nothing. For all she knew of his past he could have been a stranger. "Is it that money you said you borrowed?"

"Partly."

"How much do you owe?"

"Why?"

"Because I pay my debts too." She stepped to the wagon, reached under the canvas and lifted out the bundle which contained her few extra clothes and personal belongings. "After we separate tomorrow, or the next day, I won't see you again. For years probably. Maybe never. I don't want to start out my marriage beholden to anybody."

"You don't owe me a thing."

"I'm paying you for Andy. He doesn't have to know." She held out the bundle. "There's five hundred dollars gold in this. Take it."

Some of the weariness left his face as he studied her. "Well thanks," he said in a gentler voice. "That's real kind of you. But you take care of him and we'll call it square. He needs somebody."

"I'm beginning to think," she said, "that you're the one who's too proud to take help when you need it."

She turned to the water cask, dipped in the coffeepot and carried it over to the fire. A minute later Andy loped into camp. His horse, the gray that had belonged to Noon, was puffing and black with sweat. Andy swung down, glanced at her face and said, "What's wrong? You two feudin' again?"

"I was getting worried you couldn't find us," Liza said.

"Sounds more like a wife every day, don't she, Will?" Andy winked and took a brace of bloody rabbits from his saddle. "Look what I bagged. Man, these jacks can outrun a Morgan stud!"

She looked from one to the other, fearful that Will would explode. They were so different, these two brothers. Andy was all quickness and impulse, as unpredictable as one of those jacks he'd been hunting. That, Liza told herself, is what I love most about him. Life never would be dull with Andy Colladay. But Will— She frowned. It was Will and

Will alone who had gotten them this far. Why must she always be comparing them?

Will said mildly, "I heard the shooting. Figured it was you."

"You'll worry yourself into the grave, boy. Who else would it be?"

"See any dust back there?"

"Few dust devils. Come on, let's eat 'fore I cave plumb in."

"Go ahead," Will said. "I'll ride back and take a look."

He climbed aboard the gray and rode off at a slow walk toward a ridge some two miles to the west. Angrily Andy slammed his rabbits on the ground. "By God, you'd think I was two years old," he muttered. "I can tell a dust devil from a cavalry patrol."

Liza looked away from him at Will's dwindling figure. For once no words of defense came to her lips. Not that Andy needed defending. He'd run a horse too hard, fired a few unnecessary shots. That was only Andy's way of kicking up his heels. But she couldn't shake off the doubt that he had been—well, a little careless. Irresponsible.

"That Will," Andy went on, "sometimes he's worse'n a tick under your hide."

Liza faced him across the fire. Now was the time to soothe his feelings, to divert him with talk of the river trip ahead, their plans for the future. She was learning to coax Andy out of these moods. But one matter she had to settle first. "Andy, did he tell you about the money he borrowed for this outfit?"

"Sure. He got a loan on his ranch."

"What if he can't pay back the loan?"

"Lose it, I guess."

"Lose his ranch? To a man like that Noon?"

"It's not much." Andy shrugged. "I'd do the same for him."

"Would you?" she said slowly. "Would you, Andy?"

Andy poured himself a cup of coffee and balanced it on a rock, peering at her. "What's got into you?"

"I wish you'd told me," she said. "That's all."

Andy's face darkened in the ruddy fire shine. "What you want me to do? Lick his hand? It's not my fault we were broke."

Liza bit her lip. No, it wasn't Andy's fault. It never was. Never would be. But she was too weary to argue. "I'll get your supper."

As she moved toward the wagon he grabbed her by the shoulder. "Don't *you* start tellin' me right and wrong."

Let me be patient, she thought. Let me understand him. He's all I have in this world. "Andy, Andy," she breathed, "nothing's wrong. It's just that I never realized how much Will's done for us."

"Yeah, he's Christ on a cracker barrel. We'd be in Mexico now, if it wasn't for him."

"You don't believe that!"

His fingers gripped her arm. "We're here because you sided with him. Against me. That's the only reason. And don't you forget it."

"That's not so, Andy."

"Close enough. I've had me aplenty of advice. From now on—"

He stalked away from her, got some rations from the wagon and ate standing up. Liza watched in silent dismay. He'd never acted quite like this before, so unreasonable, lashing out at her. To love him was to forgive him, this changeable man of hers. But she felt, for the first time, almost sorry for him. It was a disturbing emotion.

"I'm sorry, Andy. I didn't mean to quarrel."

He grunted. "Better grab some sleep. Before ole Will gets us on the prod again."

He took a sip of coffee from his cup, made a face and flung out the contents. Crawling under the wagon with a blanket, he bedded in the sand. Liza waited a bit, then made one more effort. "I'll make some fresh coffee," she offered, "if that was too strong."

"Strong? This gyp water's not fit to drink."

She walked back to the fire and sat against a rock, hugging her knees against the soft stir of cool air that had

crept in with night. Some lizard or trade rat scurried through the desert holly. Down the wash a canyon wren twittered sleepily. Liza looked up at the stars, which seemed so brilliant in this dry clear air. Already Andy was snoring.

In some strange way he reminded her of Jack. Jack Kincaid, the man she had married as a girl, so many years ago. She had run off with him to escape the drudgery of home, run off to a fabled golden land called California. And now she was running again, with another man, Andy Colladay. Running where? To Texas, to the South, to war, wherever he took her. Running from the Red Ox and Nigger Alley and a faro layout. This too was an escape, for Andy as well, for both of them—their second chance. We'll make it work, she told herself fiercely; we have to.

Life in California had been anything but golden, not with Jack Kincaid, nor since. There had been too many nights in raw mining camps, too many days in tents and dingy boarding houses, too much of loneliness and despair and downright hunger. Jack had been a gambler, neither a successful nor honest one, so they had moved often and frequently by request. They shifted up and down the state, while Liza took in washing and Jack courted his luck. Then one night a drunken loser shot him, leaving her a pearl-handled derringer and several hundred dollars' worth of I.O.U's.

Most women in her position had one last resource and they sold it. Liza had been rejecting bids of that sort since she was fifteen. But the proprietor of a faro game came up with a different proposition. To be a dealer, he said, a woman didn't need much brains or looks, although the latter helped. Just so she was a woman. Miners would flock from miles around to buck a lady tiger. Salary or percentage, all the house spirits she cared to drink, and a right handsome offer he considered it.

She stayed long enough to pay her husband's debts and acquire a certain skill with cards, and moved on. But by then she was as marked as one of Jack's old decks. She could afford the best hotels, the finest gowns, but she was,

by the custom of the country, no longer a lady. She had crossed that boundary from beyond which no woman could return.

At first this did not trouble her. She liked the excitement of each new place, the freedom from poverty. Men stared at her with admiration, jostled to lose their money at her layout, invited her to champagne suppers. When some gambler or perspiring rancher grew too ardent she moved on to the next town. For a Black Irish farm girl it was all one heady whirl.

But gradually the novelty wore off. The faces across the smoky rooms began to look alike, each voice to sound the same. She came to hate the avid eyes, the moist groping hands, knees pressing under the table. The few men she might have grown to like were not, she discovered, the serious kind. They played on one side of the street and married women from the other side—the proper, the respectable side.

Still, she had felt sure that someday the right man would come along. She knew she had in her heart and body abundant love to pour out on the man who would return that love. Not another Jack Kincaid. Not just a man whose name and bed she'd share. She could be patient. But the months slipped by, the years, the deadfalls where she dealt mechanically night after night, with no more feeling than a doll. She was twenty-four. Hangtown. Sacramento, San Francisco. Los Angeles.

Then one day Andy Colladay walked into the Red Ox and her whole life changed.

She looked over at his sleeping form under the wagon now and frowned. What was it about him that made her think of Jack Kincaid? Not his looks or manner, not his speech or clothes or anything she could put a name to. Yet the resemblance was there, a tiny shadowy cloud far back in her mind.

Presently Will rode back into the wash and joined her beside the fire, munching on some hardtack. The only sound was Andy's snoring.

"Guess I pull first guard tonight," he said dryly.

"Did you see anything from the ridge?"

Will shook his head. "Too dark when I got there."

"That dust Andy saw," she said, "could it have been Indians?"

"None this side of the river. They won't leave water this time of year."

"Are they dangerous?"

He poured a cupful of coffee and sipped it slowly. "Where'd you learn to cook?"

"If you don't like it," she said, "throw it out. Andy did."

"Me and Andy don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. I like this fine."

"Thank you." She smiled. "But I asked a question."

"You'll see Mojaves tomorrow," he said. "A pile of 'em. They'll act real friendly. And every second they'll be figuring if they can slit our throats and steal our horses. That answer it?"

She looked at his face and gave a little involuntary shiver. "Then how—"

"They're a big tribe. Control the Colorado for a hundred miles. They've made a good thing out of butchering emigrant trains that ferried over. Then the Army finally whipped 'em and built the fort. So now they mind their manners."

"Oh." And after a long silence she said, "You liked the Army, didn't you?"

"I liked the men in it, mostly. They weren't all Texans, either."

When he had finished eating he scattered the fire with his boot and kicked sand on the embers. The camp dimmed into darkness but after a moment her eyes adjusted to the starlight. Will got his rifle, climbed up the bank and disappeared soundlessly among the brush. Somewhere in the distance a coyote howled and another nearby answered with a bark that exploded like lunatic laughter. Liza jumped to her feet. Suddenly the night seemed black with menace. She scrambled after Will.

A few yards beyond the wash she spied his tall motionless figure. She thought she understood now why he didn't ask

her to stand watch. With a self-conscious laugh she said, "I never knew a coyote could sound like *that!*"

"They don't often. A Yuma buck told me once it's a sign of bad luck."

"I don't believe in luck," she said. "Good or bad."

They fell silent once more, standing close in the night, but his attention was far from her. His head turned slightly as his senses ranged out, eyes sweeping the flats and ridge beyond for any hostile presence. He might have been part of the night itself, rooted there, she thought, in his natural element like some ageless desert shrub.

The coyote gave its crazy hyena bark again, but this time she didn't start. "Is that what you always wanted to be—a soldier?"

"In those days all us kids did. We wanted to grow up like Sam Houston. So when the Mexican War came along I lit out from home and joined up."

"You couldn't have been very old."

"Seventeen."

"Your wife—was she Mexican?"

"Yes."

His voice had turned hard and Liza felt her face burn. She had no right to pry like this. But after a pause he went on. "But that happened later. After the war I drifted West. Knew the cow business, or thought I did. Settled down on the Santa Cruz. Maria and I'd been married about a year. She was expecting a baby. We had a nice little place, a good start on a herd. When her time came I rode into Tubac to fetch the doctor—"

He broke off and rubbed one hand along his rifle barrel. "When we got back, Doc and I, he had to bury her. I couldn't look at—what they'd done. She'd been so pretty."

"Indians?"

"Apaches. A raiding party. What they couldn't carve up they burned."

Watching his eyes, she felt a squeeze of compassion. She might not understand Will Colladay but she was glad she had learned this much about him. It explained, perhaps, his



quiet, solitary ways, his deadly single-mindedness that sometimes frightened her.

"So I went back to the Army," he said. "As a scout. I swore I'd hamstring every 'Pache in Arizona. I was like a crazy man. But you can't wipe out a thing like that with killing. You live with it or it kills you. When I found that out I quit for good."

"And bought a ranch?"

He nodded. "Some land anyway. Figured maybe Andy and I could make a fresh start. But—well, you know Andy."

"Yes," she said. But do I? she wondered. Do I really know him? "Maybe he has to find out for himself."

A faint breeze stirred through the greasewood. As though closing the subject, Will moved away from her and peered along the wagon tracks. "He ought to be on guard right now instead of you," Liza said. "You took his turn last night too."

"Oh, let him sleep."

"Why should he? You haven't shut your eyes since yesterday." Firmly she added, "I'll go wake him."

Ignoring Will's protest, she returned to the wash, knelt down by the wagon and shook Andy's arm. At last she got him half awake. He sat up yawning and stretching. "It's time to relieve Will," she told him.

He gave a snort and would have burrowed back in his blanket, but she shook him again, then sprinkled water on his face and finally got him erect. "It's only fair," she said. "Will's dead on his feet."

"Who ain't?" Andy grumbled. But he buckled on his gun and went stumbling across the wash. She watched anxiously a minute, then climbed to her bed in the wagon. Shortly she heard Will's light returning step, heard him settle in the sand, and then his deep even breathing. In an hour or so Andy would wake them both, the men would hitch up the team and they'd drive on toward the Colorado again.

It would be the final leg of their journey together and the prospect of tomorrow held her sleepless for a time.

She thought of Will, of the woman he had married and lost. She thought of him riding back across this same desert alone once they'd said good-by. Always alone. And somehow tomorrow seemed all too near. Then her eyelids closed like leaden weights.

When she came awake she was instantly aware of a change in the air. It was much cooler. Puzzling over this, she drew the blanket close about her and peered out from under the canvas, up at the sky. While she slept the Dipper had wheeled far around toward the horizon. Hours must have passed then, not one but several. Was something wrong? They should have been on the road long before now.

A glance down at Will reassured her. He was still sprawled in exhausted sleep. But where was Andy? Raising her head, she heard his rhythmic snoring off in the brush beyond the wash. Andy had fallen asleep too. Andy on guard, sleeping almost till dawn. Now they would be hours late. And suddenly she was angry.

If she called she might startle the horses. Grimly she crawled out of the wagon. She knew then what it was about Andy that had reminded her of Jack Kincaid. She hadn't seen this side of him before. He was selfish. Andy put himself first and everyone else, including her, came a tardy second. In bare feet she padded toward the sound of his snoring.

As she neared the bank a shadow reared from behind a rock. She opened her mouth but a hand stifled her scream. An arm shot out, encircled her body, held her helpless as a baby.

Will's first waking sensation was a painful prod in the ribs. He rolled over in the sand, shaking his head, and sat up. He blinked at the figure crouched above him as his mind groped back from the well of sleep, then made a belated grab for the gun he had tucked handy-to-reach under his saddle. It was gone.

"Don't get your liver in an uproar," a voice said.

Will saw the dull shine of metal in the man's hand, saw

the lean long shape of him, and jolted full awake. He didn't know how or why yet but he could guess. In a tone of dead self-disgust, he said, "That you, Mase?"

"The same," Mason Rett said cheerily. "You overslept a mite, Will. You an' Andy. That's not like an old campaigner."

Will's glance flickered over the shadowy outline of camp. He'd left his rifle up on the wagon seat, maybe twenty steps away. Knowing Rett, he was pretty sure it wouldn't be there now. If it was, he'd never get halfway.

"Sit tight," Rett told him, then called in a louder voice, "All right, Ollie, bring 'em in."

A moment later Liza emerged from the brush into the wash, closely herded by Ollie Noon. Behind them lumbered the breed Chili, carrying Andy's limp form over one shoulder like a side of beef. Chili dumped him beside the wagon. In the thin gray light of coming dawn Will could make out a welt on Andy's forehead where he'd been clouted, likely in his sleep. He looked up at Rett, a sick-sour taste in his mouth. No blame to Andy. This was *his* lookout.

If he'd seen those dust devils himself, if he hadn't stopped to rest, if he'd had the sense God gave a tumblebug— Even a bug knew when to hunt its hole. But not Will Colladay. He'd slept away the night, let this crew slip in and take him without a whimper.

But Rett didn't seem to be in any hurry. He detailed Chili to walk back and get their horses, Noon to start up a fire. Then he turned and stared at Liza. "Lady, you got yourself in bad company."

Chin high, Liza stared back at him.

"We'll fix that," Rett said. "Rustle up some breakfast, will you? Been a long night."

She glanced at Will. He nodded and she walked to the wagon. She might be scared, must be, but she didn't show it. She'd seen enough of men, Will thought, to know what these three were. But Rett's mind wasn't on a woman now. He waited till Noon had the fire blazing high and called him over.

Ollie Noon came to a spraddle-leg stop and grinned down

at Will, trailing a length of rope in one hand. "How'ja want him, Mase? Barbee-cued?"

"You hear that, Will?" Rett said. "Ollie's still peeved at you. He's a bad one to rile."

"What you peddling this time?" Will said.

Rett laughed. "Want to know the God's truth, I'm peddling you. You and your brother. To the Army. Two thousand dollars on delivery. That's General Sumner's offer."

Will scraped one boot against the other. So they'd found the lieutenant's body. He had no cause to doubt Rett's story. Mase Rett didn't have to lie. Many a man would chase across this desert in July for that much money. "You got a sizable stake in me."

"Sure have," Rett said. "Can't afford to kill you now. Alive, the general said."

"Remind me to thank him some time. Personal."

Noon took one quick step and slashed him across the face with his rope. "Don't smart talk us, Reb!"

Will rubbed a hand across the stinging fury of his cheek. "What's your trouble, Ollie? Too dry to spit?"

Noon slashed him again. This time Will felt the warm ooze of blood. Liza turned from the wagon, white-faced, with a hand pressed over her mouth. Most women would've screamed, he thought, or fainted dead away. But after a second she knelt down and began to bathe Andy's forehead with a wet cloth.

Diverted for the moment, Noon watched the movement of her body under the thin dress and moistened his lips. Then he gave the rope end another swish and slapped it against his boot. "Stole my horse," he said. "Made me walk. I ain't forgot that."

"You see," Rett said, "Ollie's the sensitive type. So keep a civil tongue."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Rett, sir."

"Tie 'em both, Ollie. Tight."

On his own, Will figured, he might make a fair-to-mid-dling fight. He still had the knife on his belt. But there was Liza to think of if things went wrong. And Andy, stretched

out like a corpse. All in all, better to bide his time. Something might turn up later. For a patient man, he had discovered, it usually did.

Noon tied his wrists, taking pleasure in knotting the rope with savage jerks. He made a thorough and expert job of it, then trussed up Andy in the same fashion, while Rett looked on with a crocodile smile. By the time he finished Chili had returned with half a dozen worn-looking horses. The three men ate food Liza had set out, squatted around the fire and conferred in low voices.

About sunrise Andy began to recover consciousness. With Liza hovering over him he tossed and moaned and finally opened his eyes. He struggled to sit up and fell back against a wheel. "Lordy!" he moaned. "My head."

"Andy," she said, "don't talk now. Just go back to sleep."

"But what happened? Last thing I was standing guard—"

"Snoring on your feet?" Liza pressed a cup to his lips. "Here, drink this and be quiet."

Rett sauntered over from the fire. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "ready to hit the road again?"

Andy tried to focus his vision. "Who's he?"

"This here," Will said, "is a gentleman from El Monte. He—you tell him, Mase."

A strange dancing light came into Rett's yellowish eyes. "Not much to tell. You're my prisoners."

Andy goggled at him. "Prisoners?"

"Prisoners of war. I'm surrendering you to the nearest military post. Which happens to be Fort Mojave."

Andy seemed too groggy to follow this. But Will did. He looked off to eastward, where the Dead Mountains loomed up desolate and gray against a brassy dawn sky. Beyond that range, just across the river, lay Mojave. By sundown or sooner they could be there, shackled in the guardhouse. Twelve hours didn't give a man much leeway for hope. "Not back to Los Angeles? Why?"

"That's the Army's job." Rett grinned. "Me, I'm just a private citizen. Seen my duty and I done it."

"Yup, you're a credit to the flag," Will said. No, Rett wasn't pressed for time. All he had to do was wait. Wait for

the ranch, Will's ranch, to drop in his lap like a ripe red pawpaw.

That thirty days to pay had shrunk to something like three weeks. And three weeks from now Will Colladay would still be manacled in one of Mojave's iron-barred, sweat-bath cells, waiting transport to trial. Hurry up and wait. He knew, and Rett knew, the old Army game. "Maybe you'll get a medal too."

"I'm not greedy. All I want's that cash reward."

Will felt a sharp hot lance of shame. Here he was, fretted over his ranch, losing land, while Andy stood a chance to hang. More than a chance. A dead sure certainty. Unless some miracle blossomed right out of the desert, like a green bay tree in hell. "That deal of ours. Thirty days—"

"Thirty days?" Rett shook his head. "You made your deal, friend. Thirty years, maybe. If you're lucky." He swung back to the fire and yelled at Noon and Chili, "Saddle up, boys. We're pulling out."

Ten minutes later Will was hoisted astride his horse, alongside Andy on the ewe-necked roan. Already the rope was burning into his wrists and the sun, even at this early hour, pressed down with smothering force. Tight-lipped and pale, Liza climbed to the wagon seat and took the reins, while the others prepared to ride. Then Ollie Noon slid off his gray and walked over to her. "I better spell you with that team, honey," he said loudly.

She looked down at him. "I can manage alone, thank you."

Rett and Chili stopped tightening their cinches to watch. "Where I come from," Noon said, "we don't let wimmin do man's work." He sprang up onto the seat beside her.

His face dark, Andy twisted in the saddle. "Easy," Will murmured. "Don't let 'im frizzle you."

"If he touches her, I'll—"

"No, you won't."

Andy settled back, pure misery in his eyes. "I'll do what? That's right—nothin'. And I'm the jaybird who got us into this. Asleep on guard!"

"Spilt milk now," Will said. "Could be worse though."

"How worse?"

"Pray a little. That's what I'm doin'."

With Mase Rett in the lead and the wagon trailing a pennant of dust behind, they plodded on. The sun rose and the heat poured down. By ten o'clock the rocks were scorching to the touch. By noon each breath seemed to sear the lungs. The land shimmered around them like some restless smoky sea. After a midday halt they crawled on through the jaws of a canyon where the heat lay trapped in waiting. It was late afternoon before they broke through the last rocky barrier and looked down on the valley of the Colorado.

The river's great muddy torrent, chocolate brown under the sun, flowed through a forest of dark green that grew to the water's edge. It was well below flood crest, but still wide. From this height Will could make out the patchwork of Mojave squash and maize fields on the opposite shore, but a shoulder of granite hid the fort itself. Downstream the spires of The Needles stood out against the dun barrens beyond. He tried to spot a ferry landing, some movement of troops, but Rett yelled the column forward again and they started down the slope.

Soon they were winding through a lush tangle of *palo verde*, mesquite and ironwood. Blackbirds rose in raucous swarms and roadrunners darted ahead through the brush. Studying the ruts, Will observed and wondered at the lack of fresh wheel or horse tracks. Nobody had passed along here in over a week, not even an unshod Indian pony. The horses broke into a trot, smelling water. They rode into a thicket of cottonwoods and suddenly the river, the mighty Rio Colorado, was at their feet.

In this quiet stretch the current was not too swift and the water looked deep, free of sandbars. A roadway of sorts had been cut down through the bank and a mound of rocks marked the ferry-cable anchor, but of the cable itself there was no sign. On the far bank a flat-bottom scow of sawed planks, evidently the ferry, lay tilted in the mud and reeds, half out of water. The birds had settled to their feeding again and a hush fell over the crossing. A queer

spooky hush, it seemed to Will. The trading post, he knew, stood behind the next rise. Somebody should be about.

Rett dismounted and hailed the other shore. His voice sounded lost and forlorn in the twilight. He shouted again but no one answered. Noon hopped down from the wagon and scooped himself a drink. "Looks like a flood washed out the cable."

Will glanced back at the high-water line of driftwood. The cable anchor was several feet above the highest mark. "More like it was cut," he said.

"Cut?" Rett frowned. "Why?"

"Dunno. Something queer here, though."

"These bottoms flood every summer with the runoff," Rett said.

"Sure, in June. They'd've slung a new cable by now." He looked over at Liza on the wagon seat. She gave him a ghost of a smile but her face was drawn. A mosquito whined in his ear and he slapped at it awkwardly with his bound hands. "Another thing. There's no smoke from the post. The fort either."

"Why should there be?" Rett demanded. "It's way past supertime."

Will stared across the river, listening to the lisp of current. In this silence they'd have heard at least one bugle call; one of those Army horns carried for miles. It wasn't any single fact that nagged him, just a lot of details. Then his eye caught a flash of movement across the river. Two Mojaves were floating along under the far bank on a small reed raft. Rett saw them at the same time. He waved his arm and yelled.

"Hey, you two! Come over here!"

They took one startled look, grabbed up paddles and began to dig. Rett yelled again but the two Indians paddled furiously by. Intent on the raft, Will was barely aware that Noon had run back toward the wagon. When he peered around he saw Noon with a rifle, taking aim downstream. Will slid to the ground and hit him in a running chest-high lunge. Noon fell and the rifle exploded with a shocking roar. Instantly another storm of birds rose from the



bottoms, cawing and screaming, until the sky seemed black.

Noon got slowly to his feet as the Indians disappeared around a bend. He turned on Will with the rifle.

"Mase, call this linthead off!"

Rett stepped between them and shoved the barrel aside. "Simmer down, Ollie. We got a river to cross."

"Shoot one of those Mojaves," Will said, "and you'll never see daylight. None of us will."

Noon hesitated, scowling at him. Then he brushed the mud off his pants and turned his back. Rett picked up a stick and tossed it out in the water, studying the drift. Now Indians began to appear on the other shore, drawn by the shot. They streamed out of the trees and brush and stood gaping—bucks armed with spears and bows, squaws in bark skirts, naked pot-bellied children. A hundred or more, maybe a whole village, too many to count. And not a white among them.

"Look at those beggars," Rett said. "Steal everything they lay their hands on." He tossed another stick out. "We can swim the horses over. But the wagon—"

"Better sleep on it. Not much light left."

"I'm sleeping in that fort," Rett said. "Tonight."

Another raft shot out from the bank, this one a platform of logs poled by six men. They came to midstream, maneuvering skillfully, and shouted something after Rett waved them on. They poled in close and one jumped ashore. Rett looked him over, then stepped to the raft and gave it a kick.

"Solid enough," he said. "Chili, ask how much to ferry us across."

Chili wagged a hand at the Indian who seemed to be in charge. Will inspected the other five, who leaned on their poles and stared solemnly back at him. These Mojaves were taller than the other river tribes, deep-chested and muscular, with tattoo designs across their noses. Their only covering was a fiber g-string and they wore their hair atop their heads, plastered with mud and twigs like a bird's nest, to keep out lice. They might look outlandish, he thought, but they were fighters. They'd held off all comers, including

Apaches, until the Army hauled up six-pounders, but nobody had tamed them yet.

"Thirty dollar," Chili announced.

"Mangy robber!" Rett said. "See if you can beat him down."

"Thirty dollar, *señor*. Tomorrow, forty. The price goes up."

Rett swore and got out three coins. The Mojave examined them minutely, tested them between his teeth, and then nodded.

Will stepped forward. He couldn't speak a word of the dialect, but he had a working knowledge of basic Yuman. "Where are the pony soldiers?"

The Mojave stared at him and shrugged.

"Why are there no soldiers at the crossing?"

The Mojave shook his head and shrugged again. Will turned to Rett, "That's Injun country over there. For ten dollars you can wait one more night."

"Not one minute," Rett said. "You've run out your time." He nodded at Chili. "The wagon first, tell 'em."

Quickly the mules were unharnessed. The Mojaves rolled the wagon down onto the raft, blocked its wheels with rocks and poled off, jabbering among themselves. Fifteen minutes later they were back for the stock. Will, Andy, Liza and Rett crossed on the third trip. It was nearly dark when the four of them stepped out on the eastern bank into a crowd of Indians. They were everywhere underfoot, hundreds of them now, Will guessed, a whole encampment swarming about. They surrounded the wagon and horses in a solid mass that blocked off the road to the fort. And still no soldiers, not a uniform in sight. He peered back toward the California shore, separated by a hundred yards or so of empty river. Already it seemed so far, as unreachable as the moon.

Liza shrank against him as a squaw reached out to finger her dress. He elbowed the Indian away and said, "They're curious. Like kids. They don't see a white woman very often."

"But the fort—there must be some Army wives."

"Officers don't bring their women to Mojave."

Andy moved up beside them. He'd been silent and morose all day and he said glumly, "Where is the blasted fort?"

"Beyond the trees. Can't see it from here."

Noon and Chili were struggling to hitch up the mules again and Rett was roaring at the Mojaves to stand clear. In the confusion Will knew he could slip away, and maybe Andy too. But where? The river was at his back, the fort just ahead. Wherever he hid these Indians would smoke him out. When it came right down to choosing, he'd take his chances with the military. But the feeling grew on him second by second. There was trouble here. He could smell it in the sultry night air, feel it like an ache in his bones.

At last he was mounted and riding forward once more, through a gauntlet of Mojaves, closed up tight behind Rett. He'd never seen so many at one time or place before. The road led across the bottoms, around a brackish slough and up a short steep rise. They passed the darkened bulk of the trading post and reached the flats above the river. Over where the fort should be not a light shone. It wasn't much, as Will recalled—a scatter of brush-roofed 'dobs—barracks, quartermaster warehouse, officers' quarters, stables. The end of Creation, the worst assignment a soldier could draw. Fort Mojave, they said, was where the desert left off and hell began.

But now there wasn't even that. No wall or roof line broke the sweep of space. Will stared, blinked his smarting eyes and stared again. Nothing. Nothing but empty, iron-hard flats under the night sky.

"Jesus!" Rett said in a tone of awe, of total disbelief. "Where's the Army?"

They got down and walked over to what had been the flag pole, now only a charred stump among some rocks. The walls lay in heaps of blackened rubble. What debris the Mojaves hadn't scavenged was littered about the ruins—scraps of paper, bottles, a few cans, bits of burned wood.

Will toed a horseshoe out of some ashes where the remount corral once had stood. The destruction had been complete, and fairly recent. Perhaps a week ago.

"Apaches!" Rett said. "The 'Paches burnt 'em out."

"You never saw a 'Pache this close to the river. They're blood enemies with these people."

He bent over to examine a piece of scorched leather, trying to read the story of what had happened here. There was no indication of a fight or a forced retreat, no arrows or bullet marks or fresh grave mounds. The Army hadn't left much of anything behind. They'd just gone. Vanished. Fort Mojave was a ghost fort.

The Indians were crowding in again, excited as terriers. Chili was making frantic hand-talk with a scrawny, grizzled old Mojave who wore an officer's crimson sash around his loins. "Ask him what happened, Chili," Rett ordered. "We got to find those troops."

"Is not to understand, *señor*," Chili said. "This old one, he speaks of soldiers, but I think he lies."

"Mase," Will said, "take this rope off me. I can't talk Injun hog-tied."

Rett eyed him and looked around the ring of Mojaves. Then he pulled his knife and sliced the rope. "Go ahead. But one wrong move and I'll blow your head off."

Will rubbed at his wrists as the blood surged back into his fingertips with an agonizing spurt. Flexing his hands, he said evenly to Rett, "Don't *you* act gun-happy. One damn fool's about all any Indian can stomach."

Stepping to the wagon, he rummaged among the food and found a lump of brown Mexican sugar. He held it out to the old Mojave and made the sign to eat. The Indian stared at it, a fierce suspicious gleam in his black eyes. Then he touched a knuckle to his chest and said, "Caballo."

"Caballo," Will repeated. He'd heard that name. Caballo was a chief, one of several for this tribe. His fighting days might be over but he commanded great respect along the river. "Sugar. *Piloncillo*."

Caballo scraped the lump with a thumbnail and gave it a tentative lick. His toothless mouth broke into a grin. He

crunched the sugar between his gums and sucked noisily, then stretched out a hand for more. After Will had passed out all the sugar in the wagon and taken a few puffs on a ceremonial pipe, the chief began to talk.

He talked about himself, about his valor as a warrior, the grievances of his people against the white man. Will listened, letting the old man ramble. This was the ancestral home of the Mojaves, Caballo said. It had belonged to their grandfathers' grandfathers. Not even the pony soldiers with their many guns had been able to take it from them. The moon began to rise and Will sat very still, cross-legged on the ground, waiting with outward patience for the oratory to end.

When Caballo had finished at last, Will looked up slowly at Rett, then at Liza and Andy. A cold finger of fear traced along his spine. "Well?" Rett demanded. "What's the old devil say?"

"Near as I get it," Will said, "the fort's been abandoned. Orders came through from Army headquarters to evacuate all troops and supplies. Caballo says ten days ago. They blew up the place and left."

"Left? What for?"

"The war. To make sure Mojave didn't fall into Reb hands. The Army doesn't have enough troops to hold the whole river. So they fell back to Fort Yuma."

"You mean there's some Southern troops way out here?" Andy said.

"All Caballo knows is what the commander told him. He just followed orders."

"Fort Yuma, that's two hundred miles!" Rett said.

Will nodded. "You got a ways to go yet to collect that reward."

"But the steamer? When's the next one due?"

"Army stopped all river traffic too. Won't be another boat till the war's over."

The Indians were silent and watchful now. Off in the distance Will saw the flicker of their village fires. His gaze lifted to Liza again, held on her. He'd said his private little prayer, hoping for some chance. But he hadn't asked for

anything like this. One lone white woman. Five men. "No boat," he said. "No fort. No Army. That leaves us. Us and the Mojaves."

It was early when Will awoke next morning but already the river bottom heat felt sticky and oppressive, worse than on the high dry desert. He wondered how even a Mojave could stand it. The six of them had spent a bad night in the only building left—the trading post. Its walls and roof were intact but the shelves had been stripped. Apparently the owner had cleared out too.

The post was a single room with a counter built of packing cases along the rear wall. It had one door in front, a window on either side, and the dirt floor was covered with trash and junk, evidence of hasty abandonment. Will hadn't slept much, but Rett and Noon and Chili had been up all night, watching the horses, the Mojaves, and their prisoners. The three of them were outside somewhere now. Rett had tied his hands again, but not his feet. He got up, tormented by an itch in the middle of his back that he couldn't reach, and crossed to the doorway. Fleas, or nits, he guessed. He'd have to try some of that Colorado mud for vermin.

The horses and mules and wagon had been run into a pole corral that abutted the post. Chili was sitting under a near-by mesquite, guarding them with a rifle across his lap. A few yards beyond him Liza busied herself over a breakfast fire while Andy looked on with a sour expression. Will leaned one shoulder against the door jamb and scratched. His gaze swung over the ruins of the fort down to the river bottoms and the mud-and-wattle huts of the Mojave village. Women were plodding back and forth with water and firewood or out to tend the fields, but only one buck was in sight, obviously on lookout. The others, Will had no doubt, were holding a powwow about their unexpected guests.

Seeing him in the doorway, Andy came over from the fire. In a low urgent voice Andy said, "We got to get away from here."

"Amen to that, brother."

"What you said last night gave me an idea. There must be a Confederate force somewhere around, or the Yanks wouldn't walk out like this."

"Don't bet money on it."

"When I was in the stockade," Andy said, "I heard tell an Arizona column was pushing west from Texas for Tucson. No reason we can't find it and tie in."

Will glanced past Andy's shoulder at Chili, who was watching them impassively. "I heard a rumor too. A California column is pushing east to head the Rebs off. Take your pick."

"You know," Andy said, "sometimes I think you are a by-god-Yank at heart. What do you believe in?"

"Right now," Will said, "I believe in those Mojaves. They make a man get religion fast."

As he stepped back inside the doorway to let Andy through he kept his eyes on Chili. The breed cast a furtive look at Liza to make sure her attention was elsewhere, and pulled a bottle from under his shirt. He held it to the light, tilted it up to his lips for a long shuddering pull, then deftly whisked the bottle from sight again. Wiping his mouth with a huge dirty hand, he settled back against the tree.

"Now where," Will said softly, "do you s'pose he got that?"

"Got what?" Andy muttered.

"That's sure no river water he's guzzling."

"Likely the trader cleared out in such a rush he left some booze behind. Chili's been pawing through this stuff."

Will drew farther back into the room and waited. In a minute or so Chili again slipped out his bottle and took another heroic drink. His interest aroused now, Andy said, "Must be whisky. Really swills it, don't he?"

"He's prob'ly got a cast-iron gut," Will said. "But two belts like that'd founder anybody." He caught Andy's eye. "You thinking what I am?"

Andy's face brightened. "Let's take him. Before Rett gets back."

"We'll have to do it sudden. Drunk or sober, he's a bull."

Andy grinned. "Never saw the Injun yet I couldn't lick with both hands tied."

They sauntered out the door, seemingly casual, toward the mesquite. Neither Rett nor Ollie Noon were anywhere in sight. Will stopped a few feet from Chili and Andy slanted off toward the fire. Trying to keep them both in view, Chili hitched his body around slightly. "Where's the boss, Chili?"

Chili looked up with glassy eyes, looked around to make sure of Andy. In a thick furry voice he said, "*Señor* Rett, he washes at the river."

"Good for him." Will said. "How about passing that bottle?"

Chili's hand closed over the rifle. "Keep 'way from me."

"Don't be a pig, Chili. I won't tell Rett."

Chili said one short ugly word. He wasn't stagger-drunk, Will decided, just woozy, and still dangerous. But he'd let Andy slip up behind him. Andy was easing in now, ready to rush him from the rear. Chili shifted the rifle off his lap, uncertain, a little fuddled, and Will could smell the liquor when he breathed. For Chili this had been a long dry.

"Come on, Chili boy. Spread the cheer."

Whisky sweat stood out on Chili's pockmarked face and his armpits were dark half moons. He half sensed some danger and started to rise. Andy edged in another step. Over by the fire Liza watched with a hand clutched to her throat. Now! Will thought. Now, Andy! Before the brute turns. But Andy hesitated. And then the moment was gone. With a shout Rett charged out of the river-bottom brush below.

Chili blinked and got to his feet unsteadily. As he did, the bottle fell out of his shirt and shattered on a rock. He dropped to his knees beside the bits of glass, beside the stain that was liquid soaking into the ground. His face screwed up like a man about to cry. Then Rett came up at his long stork stride, a gun in his hand, followed by Ollie Noon at the trot.



He motioned Will and Andy over against the wall, and swung around on Chili. "You stupid, stinkin' breed! Can't trust you out of my sight. Another second they'd've jumped you."

Chili lifted moist pleading eyes.

Rett noticed the glass then. He grabbed a handful of Chili's hair, jerked his head back, leaned close and sniffed his breath. "Drunk! Where'd you get that stuff?"

Chili got up again, swaying for balance.

"Answer me!"

Chili waved a hand in the direction of the trading post. "A hole, *señor*. In the wall. Hidden. One bottle only, I swear it!"

"If there's a bottle anywhere," Rett said, "you'll sniff it out. I warned you." Suddenly raising his arm, he slashed Chili across the temple with his revolver barrel.

The blow would have felled most men. Chili tottered against the corral, clutching for support, and then his knees steadied. He pressed a hand to his forehead and brought it away bright with blood. Wiping it on his pants, he peered over at Will with a look of naked hate. A look that said: He hit me, but you made him do it, therefore you are the one who hit me. And somewhere in that simple brain of his, Will knew, he'd be scheming how to hit back double.

"Go soak your head in the river," Rett ordered. "Sober up. Then send that chief what's-his-name up here."

With one more stricken glance at the broken bottle, Chili shambled off toward the river bottoms. Rett holstered his gun and turned to Will. "You're stupid too, Colladay. I gave you credit for more sense."

"Call him back," Will said. "We're in trouble if he tries to order Caballo around."

"Get some more rope, Ollie. This time we will hogtie 'em."

"Hear me out, Mase," Will said. "I know these Injuns. You get this outfit hitched up and back across the river, on the California side. While you can."

"That's what I'm fixing to do. Now I've come this far

I'll just haul you two yahoos down to Fort Yuma." With a little smile he looked around at Liza. "And we'll be proud to have your company, madam. Won't we, Ollie?"

Noon crawled through the poles of the corral with a coil of rope. He buffed his fingernails on his shirt and grinned at her. "Sure will, honey. It'll pleasure us."

A sudden screech cut across the morning quiet. Will tensed, peering down at the bottoms where Chili had disappeared. Rett and Noon whirled around. A passing squaw stopped, threw down her bundle of firewood, turned and ran. A moment behind her Chili lumbered out of the brush holding a second squaw aloft over his head. She was a buxom woman bare to the waist, and she was squalling and kicking. Chili tossed her in the air like a puppy and caught her. She let out another wail and pummeled at his face, and he threw her up again.

Noon slapped his thigh and doubled over with a whoop of laughter. "Ki-yi! Chili's caught himself a gel!"

Will squinted his eyes against the sun glare bouncing off the river. He'd seen men explode like this, meek and mouselike one minute, berserk the next. Chili had struck out at the first thing that happened across his path. He was laughing now as he grabbed the squaw around the middle, a wild idiot cackle that carried up the rise. She thrashed her legs and shrieked and shrieked, helpless in his grip, then abruptly went limp and still. He's broken her neck, Will thought.

"Let her go, you crazy bastard!" Rett bellowed.

Aware for the first time that he had an audience, Chili left off shaking her. He turned heavily and peered up the slope. Even at this distance he looked dazed.

"Turn her loose!"

Chili shook a fist in the direction of Rett's voice. Tucking the woman under one arm, he started off for the river again. Almost too late he saw his danger. A Mojave with a club ran out of the brush. The other men began pouring from the village then, yelling and waving their weapons, racing to cut him off. Chili jerked to a stop. An arrow whistled

past his ear. He dropped the woman, turned once more and ran.

The lead Indians stopped when they reached the squaw, but half a dozen more dashed on, gaining with every step. Chili was no sprinter. He ran the way he walked, with a head-down, spread-elbow wobble. He stumbled up toward the post, tripped and fell, two bucks almost on top of him.

"Run, damn you, run!" Rett yelled. He drew his gun and fired. The Mojaves faltered, then dived for cover among some rocks on his second shot. Chili got to his feet and staggered the last fifty yards. His face a mildew green, he leaned against a corral post and was violently sick.

"Liza, inside!" Will said. "Quick."

Her eyes, glazed with shock, swung around to his. Without a word she stepped by Andy through the post doorway. "They can't reach us with those bows," Rett said.

"Put the gun up," Will said. "Maybe I can palaver with 'em."

"Like hell I will."

"If Chili killed that squaw, you already got one foot in the door."

The Mojaves milled about the foot of the knoll, their numbers swelling by the minute. They seemed to pop out of the ground, the brush, everywhere, as noiseless/as ants, a brown crawling flood of them. Then a squaw cut loose a keening wail. There was a boil of activity and their ranks split, making a path for an old man with a red sash around his loins. Caballo. The chief stepped forward, flanked by several younger bucks who carried rifles.

These would be muzzle-loaders mostly, Will guessed, old smooth-bores the Mojaves had looted down the years. Deadly enough for close work, but no match in range or fire power for a modern breech-loading Henry or Sharps. As Caballo and his little escort advanced slowly up the rise other bunches filtered into the brush. In a quarter hour or less they'd have the post surrounded. He saw all this, the tactic of encirclement that would cut them off from the river, from retreat, while his mind totted up the pluses and

minuses of forting up right here: How many rounds, how much water, the condition of the horses. If it came to a fight how long could five men hold out? In the end that would depend, as everything else did in this country, on water. And Rett hadn't filled their barrel last night.

Caballo waved his escort to a halt and walked on a few more paces alone. Halfway up the slope he stopped and raised both arms, to show he had no weapons. "He wants to talk," Will said.

"Playing for time," Rett said.

Will peered off at the Colorado, its surface so metal-bright it hurt the eyes. A hundred yards or so of quiet water. Three hundred feet, no swim at all. And the Lord knew how many Mojaves, every mother's son lusting for blood and plunder, between him and it. "Never make the river now."

"Don't need to. We'll swing east."

"Through Yavapai territory? Apaches?"

"They don't worry me."

"What does it take to worry you?" Will said softly.

Rett tapped the gun barrel in his palm. "Just one thing—the front end of this."

Will looked at Andy's tight pinched face and moved from the wall. Past the mesquite tree and the scatter of glass, past Liza's cook fire. A smell of scorched beans tickled his nose. He couldn't remember when he'd eaten last. Out on the crown of the rise he stopped. Down below the Indians stopped their movements too. Foot Indians, these Mojaves, farmers. Not horse Indians, like the Apaches. There might be a few stolen horses staked out somewhere in the bottoms, but not many. And nobody had to tell him how little water he'd carry with their chief—a prisoner with his hands behind his back.

Caballo waited, arms folded across his chest, a scrawny bundle of man who looked as hard-grained as ironwood. He wears that red sash like a general, Will thought. He damned well is a general out here, General Caballo, commander-in-chief, and he's got you sewed up in a sack. He

knows it, you know it, and you'd give your ranch away for free to be safe across that river.

Caballo's wicked little eyes wormed over Will. Then he spoke. No oratory this time, no protocol. Just the harsh guttural voice that hacked and cut and finally dismissed Will with a scalding contempt. His face fever-hot, Will walked back to the post.

"He says the woman's hurt," he told Rett. "Maybe she'll die. They want Chili."

"Chili, huh?" Rett rubbed his chin. "That the size of it?"

"Just the start. Caballo says they'll take the horses and mules, the wagon too. For that he'll let the rest of us go."

Rett snorted. "Anything more?"

"He's waiting on your answer."

"You wouldn't be lyin' to me, would you, Colladay?"

"Send Chili down there, you'll find out."

Rett turned toward the breed. Chili cringed back against the fence like some cornered beast. "You hear that, Chili? Those devils want your lights."

Chili's jaws and throat worked, but no sound came out.

"What do you reckon they'll do?" Rett said. "Fry you alive? Let the squaws work you over with their knives? Stake you on an anthill?"

Chili went to his knees, groveling, trying to clasp Rett around the legs. Rett shoved him away with a grunt of disgust and picked up the rifle from the ground. Staring down at Caballo, at the waiting braves, he said to Will, "Tell him I'll give him a present. This Sharps here. Big medicine for a chief. Then we'll talk about horses. Lay it on thick."

"He's not in any mood to dicker."

"I never saw an Injun who'd pass up a rifle."

Will ran his tongue over his cracked lips. Knowing Rett, he could halfway guess what the man had in mind. He had that edge over Caballo, even though the Mojave would be looking for some trick. "Go on," Rett said. "Before I take a notion to swap the Kincaid woman."

Will called down. Caballo heard him out in silence, but

an excited gabble broke out among the other Indians. Then Rett stepped forward, a smile on his mouth, holding the rifle above his head in both hands. "Tell him this thunderstick is his. I'll throw in some powder and lead. To prove my heart is good."

Will almost gagged on the words, the false empty words the whites had been using on the redskin ever since Columbus. Sometimes honestly meant, sometimes not, but always to one end—the short end for the Injun. He'd heard them all before. So had Caballo. The Mojave stood unmoving, suspicious and wary of a trap. The other bucks were calling advice. He stared up at the bright shiny rifle, torn by desire.

This was a prize, the Sharps. Big medicine. Bigger than many horses, a young wife or coups on the enemy. This was a vision of the power and the glory that made a savage ten feet tall. A minute stretched out. Tension grew excruciating. The slope shimmered and swam before Will's eyes. Then a change came over Caballo's gleaming mask of a face. He took a few shuffling steps, paused to look back, and climbed a little faster.

Still smiling, Rett held out the rifle, butt first. "Come on, old bugger. Closer. Few more steps."

At the last second Caballo almost drew back, his crafty eyes darting right and left. Then his hand stretched out. Rett was on him with a tiger spring, clubbing upward with the Sharps butt, smashing against his jaw. There was a sick-making splat of bone, an animal scream. The old man clawed for his knife. Rett grabbed his arm, broke it like a brittle stick. Locking an arm across his windpipe from behind, Rett held him as a shield.

"Now tell 'em!" he ordered Will. "He's my hostage. They come any closer I'll rip his gizzard out!"

For a minute the Indians below seemed to be struck dumb. Then a furious yell went up.

"They want their chief back in one hunk, they'll let us through. Tell 'em that, Colladay, and tell 'em straight. Or you'll end up with Caballo."

The Mojaves buzzed like angry bees. They shouted

threats. Some notched arrows. But not a man cut loose. The escort, after making a few half-hearted gestures, dropped back to the main force. They'd argue now, Will knew, holler and harangue each other till they whooped up a frenzy. They weren't cowards, but they weren't fools either. Not a buck down there wanted to die for Caballo. Not even for a thunderstick. The Injun makes a game of war, he thought; the Army makes it business. That's why they keep on losing. For now Rett's won.

"Time they get het up enough to fight," Rett said, "we'll be long gone. You hit an Injun first, he's done."

"You ever try hitting an Apache, Rett?"

"What you bellyaching for? You still got your hair."

Rett dragged Caballo back to the corral. "Put him on a horse," he told Noon. "I want him up front when we ride out. If they try to stop us—shoot him."

Ollie Noon swallowed and looked down at the Mojaves. "You think they'll bluff, Mase?"

Rett patted the Sharps. "There'll be some good Injuns if they don't. And you, Chili—"

Chili heaved himself to his feet.

"By rights I ought to leave you behind, you fat tub."

"*Señor*, for the love of God—"

"Hitch up the wagon. Now move! I'll cover you."

Within minutes Rett had his column formed. Held off by three rifles, the Mojaves watched with growing unrest. Caballo, riding the roan, was first, and Noon rode tight behind with a Sharps pointed at his spine. Will and Chili came next, followed by Liza in the wagon, trailing the three extra horses. Rett and Andy brought up the rear.

They filed out of the corral, across the trading-post yard. At a walk they started down the rise, straight toward the line of waiting Mojaves. Will fixed his eyes on Caballo's back. His broken arm held like a crippled wing, his other hand twisted in the mane, the old man sat erect on the horse. He started to slump but pulled himself back. As they neared the Indians he called out something in a voice shrill with pain. Whatever it was Will couldn't guess, it had the magic of command. Caballo was still chief.

Slowly, reluctantly the Indians gave ground. They backed off to make a narrow human path, just wide enough to let horses and wagon pass; No sound, no movement among them, only two walls of black hating eyes. Will held his breath and glanced sideways at Chili. The rifle was shaking in the breed's hands. Then the column was through, out on the open flats.

When they reached the ruins of the fort Rett left his position at the rear and spurred up front. "By gollies!" Noon breathed. "We done it, Mase! Busted through."

Caballo kned the roan around. The blood on his chest was the color of his sash and his face was gray death. Will looked back at the Mojaves, half a mile behind. "This far enough?"

"Far enough for what?" Rett said.

"You promised to turn him loose."

"Sure. Tell him better luck next time."

Caballo slid off the horse. He turned and limped toward the village. Before he'd gone a dozen paces Rett shot him in the back. The old man seemed to melt into the dust where he fell.

He wanted that bullet, Will thought. Expected it. He couldn't face his people after this. But one thing he taught 'em today: Never trust a white man.

"Move out, Ollie," Rett said. "On the run."

"No need to run," Will said wearily. "They won't chase us. Not far anyway."

Noon stared at him. "They won't?"

"Not where we're going." The Colorado was closed to them now, upriver and down. With the Army gone the Mojaves owned it. So there was only one direction left to go. East. Eastward beyond Fort Mojave the desert humped up into another range. Beyond that, range after range he'd never heard named and few whites had seen. No man's land. Yavapai land.

"Ain't we headin' south for Yuma?" Noon said.

One more river to cross, Will thought. The Los Angeles, the Mojave, the Colorado were behind him. Next, the Gila. Another two hundred miles of blow sand and hellfire heat,



the route they'd have to travel. "Kind of east by south," he said. "The long way round—through Apache country."

As they rode toward the swell of mountains five mounted Mojaves raced up on their flank. One shot from Rett's rifle drove them off, and after following for a couple of miles the Indians turned back. It was only a token pursuit, Will thought. The Mojaves would cremate Caballo and spread word up and down the Colorado to watch for five white men and a woman. Their neighbors to the south, the Chemehuevis, and below them the Yumas, liked horses and rifles too. The Mojaves would be satisfied with revenge second-hand, and likely they felt sure of getting it.

In his head he tried to map out the country, from what little he'd seen on scouts and what he'd been told by old-timers like Pauline Weaver and Don Diego Jaeger. Water-holes were scarce and unreliable. There wasn't a wagon road or settlement between here and Fort Yuma, now that Ehrenberg had been abandoned too. The few prospectors who'd found color at La Paz would have quit their digs when the Army withdrew its protection. The Army had left it all to the Apaches. If a man could walk a tightrope between Apaches on the east and river tribes on the west, he just might squeak through. But he'd need water. He'd need about three life spans' worth of luck.

Liza Kincaid had told him that she didn't believe in luck, good or bad. Maybe she'd changed her mind. They'd used up a fair-sized chunk today in getting away from the Mojaves. Maybe a woman, a gambler at that, felt different about such things. But Liza must have a faith of some kind. She'd gone through one misery after another and not complained. She was steadier than Andy and stronger too, in her way, Will guessed. And he felt a secret shameful tinge of envy, thinking that.

So much had happened since the night in Nigger Alley that nothing seemed real any more. The other part of his life—the ranch part—was so far off and long ago it didn't exist. He'd been riding across this desert forever, riding into the sun, toward a place that kept retreating in the distance.

Only the desert was real, everything else was a crazy, heat-blurred mirage. Even By Wingfield seemed like some bad dream. He almost wished a cavalry patrol *would* ride over the next hill, if he had to choose between the Army and Apaches.

He glanced ahead at Rett in the lead. Masę Rett would never lose his head like Ollie Noon or Chili. He was tough and shrewd and fearless. Any man who faced down a mob of howling Mojaves had sand aplenty. But this strip of Arizona wasn't his home territory. To get them through Rett would need some help. It was still a long, long way to Yuma.

At noon, when they had traveled about ten miles beyond the river, Rett called a halt. Will piled off his horse and walked to the wagon. Liza poured a little water in his mouth, then did the same for Andy. Andy crawled under the wagon, the only shade in sight. "How much left?" Will asked her.

"Less than a pint," she told him. "The other canteen's empty."

"We'll make out," he said, wanting to offer her some bit of comfort.

"Do you really believe that we'll reach Fort Yuma?"

"With bells on."

"You're not a very convincing liar, Will. But thank you."

They had no chance to say more, because Noon came up then and took the canteen from her. He drained it at a gulp. "Go easy on that!" Rett snapped at him. "We never had a chance to fill up last night."

"Man's gotta drink," Noon said. "There's a whole river back yonder."

Rett snatched the canteen from him. "There's about a thousand Injuns too. Forget the river. You know this country, Colladay. How far to the next spring?"

Will shook his head. "Can't say."

"You mean you won't?"

"I came through here once," Will said. "Three years ago. With a guide. We watered at a seep. Off that direction." He pointed with his chin toward the southeast. "But I can't

guarantee to find it." There was a long silence. Will looked at the three men, then at the empty canteen. "You got eleven head of stock to water too. Shootin' old Caballo wasn't the best idea you ever had."

Noon dropped a hand to his knife. "He's lyin', Mase. He knows. I'll get it out of him."

"Hold it, Ollie." Rett studied Will for a minute. "I smell another deal coming on."

"That's right," Will said. "To find that hole I'll have to scout ahead. And for that I'll need a rifle."

"For what?"

"The same reason those Mojaves don't chase after us. Apaches. So give me a rifle or go find water yourself."

"I haven't seen any Injun sign."

"Generally you don't. Unless they want you to. But you can bet your hide they've seen us."

He could almost read Rett's mind. It was hard to believe in Indians you didn't see. But Rett had seen other Apaches, Pinals and Chiricahuas and how they fought. These Yavapais were poor relations, the tag-end western branch, but as dangerous as any. More dangerous, maybe, because the Army had never campaigned against them. And Rett, if he knew all this, would be wondering just how much was scare talk, weighing his need for water against the risk of arming Will. To be dependent on his prisoner would gravel Rett's zinc-lined soul.

Finally he said, "Take the sorrel then. I'll give you a carbine."

Will's hands still felt like wooden blocks when he climbed back into the saddle, but he could scratch his nose or rub the sweat out of his eyes, after two days of being tied. Rett shoved the Sharps in his boot and said, "If you don't show by sundown—I got your brother and the woman."

"If I don't show," Will said, "you'll be drinking the blood out of those horses along about tomorrow."

He rode off through a broad valley along the base of the mountains, angling farther from the Colorado. There might be tanks or seeps up any one of the side canyons he passed, but he preferred to keep to the open as long as possible. A

canyon made a natural ambush. He took his bearings from a peak he remembered as Boundary Cone and searched ahead for any landmark that might seem familiar. The growth was more abundant over here—ocotillo, giant candlelike saguaro and cactus everywhere. Cholla, prickly pear, barrel, fishhook. The Indians claimed that a man could cut open a barrel cactus and survive on the juice. They were experts at survival, these desert tribes. And sudden death.

The wagon and horses dwindled behind him until a ridge cut them off from view. He watched every fold in the ground, every boulder, feeling like the last man on earth. But he knew he wasn't alone. Some lookout on a distant peak would have spotted his dust. He could almost feel eyes on his back, as fierce and blazing as the sun. When he saw the low sugarloaf hill he stopped and checked the load and breechblock of the carbine. There was no movement in the mesquite pocket ahead, nothing to mark it from a hundred other mesquite clumps, but he waited. Presently two doves winged into the growth. They didn't fly out. Positive now, he rode in, with the big hammer back to cock.

The seep held a foot or so of putrid-looking water, but he had tasted worse. He watered the sorrel, filled two canteens and beat through the brush, hunting for moccasin tracks. All he found was a five-foot rattler. Nobody had camped here in months. He could be wrong, of course. The Yavapais might be a hundred miles away along the Hassayampa, picking piñon nuts up in the mountains. They were wanderers, nomads. But he'd had that prickly feel of being under observation for a long while now.

He returned to the ridge, fired the single shot that had been agreed upon as his signal, and waited until the column had crawled up the long rise to join him. Riding in close, Rett covered him with a rifle. "You find it?"

Will nodded.

"You won't need this any more." Rett reached down and pulled the carbine from his saddle boot. "Where's that seep?"

"Untie Andy first, then I'll show you."

Rett's mouth tightened. "Pretty cute, Colladay. Only it won't work."

"Think about it," Will said. "Not just this one seep. There's tomorrow, next day, the day after. If I don't find you water—who else can?"

"Chili."

"Chili? He's a Coast Injun. He can't find that seep now, and it's not three miles from here. Try him."

Rett's eyes glittered under the dusty thicket of his brows. "So you figure you're the indispensable man?"

"Sort of." Will slapped the canteens on his saddle. "This is a sample. Tie me and Andy up again, it's the last you get." Noon had ridden up beside them. His fairish skin was burned tomato red and his bloodshot eyes held a wild shine as they settled on the canteens. "Two hundred miles to Yuma," Will went on. "These horses won't last another twenty. Maybe you can walk it, Rett, or crawl it, with the buzzards on your tail. But you'll wish to God you were back home in El Monte."

"You're in the same stew with me," Rett said.

"Difference is," Will said, "Andy hasn't got a thing to lose, and me not much." He unscrewed one canteen top and let the water gush out on the sand. "I'd as soon see you die out here with the bloats."

Rett stared down at the puddle of moisture. Then he told Ollie Noon, "Go untie the other one." Raising his glance to Will again, he said softly, "There's one little item you could lose."

"What?"

"That woman. Try to make a break, you or your brother, I'll kill her. Make one move—she's dead."

"They even hang Yankees for that," Will said.

"Maybe she's Andy's girl. But I've seen you cuttin' sheep's eyes at her. And her at you." Rett's voice went softer still. "Anybody dies out here, she'll be first. Now gimme that water."

Will's raging impulse was to slam the canteen full in his face. But he drew a long breath and handed it over.

This wasn't the time. Time, just a little more time, was what he'd bought. From now on, with him and Andy loose, Rett would have to watch them night and day, in camp and on the move. That would grind down any man in time. "For two thousand dollars," he said, "you'd shoot your mother in the back, if you ever had one."

"Never mix women and business," Rett said. "That's your mistake."

Andy rode toward them, his arms free of the rope, and Will swung away abruptly. He didn't want to talk to Andy yet. What Rett had suggested about Liza and him wasn't so, of course. That was just Rett's chamber pot notion of a joke. All the same it plagued Will, gave him a guilty turn. Liza wasn't exactly his style, but she was a lot of woman. At the start she'd detested him, but now he'd come to know her better he felt— Well, what did he feel? What did she feel?

He glanced back at the wagon where she sat handling the reins. Andy rode stiffly off to one side, his face set and sullen. They didn't look or act much like lovers, Will thought. If she were my woman— But she's not. She's Andy's. They'd be man and wife now, except for me. Get them out of this scrape somehow. If you have to kill Mase Rett to do it.

He led the column into the seep about suppertime, scaring up a flock of doves. After filling their canteens and giving each fagged animal a short ration of water, there wasn't enough left to cover the bottom of the barrel. Will dug down through hardpan to bedrock. The basin was empty, would be, until another rain, which might or might not come next year. The nearest seep he knew of was fifteen miles beyond.

They turned the horses out in the mesquite to browse what pods they could reach, and ate a hurried silent meal. No fire. No coffee. Only the hard aromatic beans chewed up in the mouth and swallowed dry for taste. They would rest for a while, Rett announced, and go on after moonrise. Will balled up his jacket for a pillow and leaned back against a rock. It was quiet here in the cool of evening and he could

almost forget how tired he was, how Rett or Noon or Chili, or all three, kept him under constant watch.

After a bit Andy squatted down beside him, back to camp. His wrists had ugly raw rope burns and his face looked ten years older. "I'm goin' to make a run for it tonight," Andy said. "You with me?"

"How?"

"It'll be full dark when Rett starts to saddle up. We grab two horses and light out. Lose him easy in this brush."

"You just might," Will said. "But there's Liza too."

"She'll be all right. Rett wouldn't hurt a woman."

Will sat up straighter. "You'd leave her behind? With him? And Ollie Noon?"

"Easy for you to preach," Andy said savagely. "It's me who stands to hang."

Will looked square at him. Sometimes, maybe, you knew a brother too well. Saw him so close up he seemed bigger than life size. You missed the mountain for the foothills, in a manner of speaking. "Andy, you told me once. I want to hear it again. You love her, or don't you?"

"Sure I do, but—"

"All right then! Don't make any such fool play."

"Get off that pulpit, boy. You wouldn't swing for a woman either. Any woman born."

"Maybe not," Will said. "But you try to ditch her like that, I'll come after you myself. With a horse whip."

Andy colored to the hairline. He stared back at Will, then walked away.

Will started to get up and follow him, but decided against it. Better not kick up a bigger row. He'd jumped Andy hard enough to hold him in line, he hoped. Trouble with Andy, he never figured more than one move ahead. He zigged and zagged with no heed to the consequences. Liza Kincaid was the best thing that ever happened to him, Will thought. I won't let him hurt her, no matter what.

From his rock he could see her behind the wagon, combing her hair with the aid of a hand mirror she had taken from her bundle of clothing. Her brows were knitted in a frown of concentration and he watched the graceful move-

ment of her arms, the fullness of her body. It was an unconscious feminine ritual, somehow touching to him but he wished she had chosen some other time, for now she caught the eye of Ollie Noon. Noon strolled over to her with a blanket and spread it on the ground. From his pocket he got out a grimy deck of cards. "Let's me an' you play a few hands," he said.

Liza's face was waxlike. "No thank you."

"Aw, come on," Noon said in a wheedling tone. "You can deal 'em slick, I heard tell."

Liza shook her head.

"Afraid I'll trim you?" Noon gave the cards an expert one-hand riffle. "Then we'll jest play a little sociable game for grabs. How 'bout it, angel?"

"No," she said faintly.

It might have ended there, but Andy stepped up. His eyes were blazing and he said, "Get away from her, Noon."

"Oh, ho!" Noon grinned at her. "Ain't I good enough for you? Not like this here Southern gentleman."

Rett and Chili turned to watch. Carefully Will got to his feet. "Never mind, Andy," Liza said. "It's all right." She put the comb and mirror back in her bundle and took one step toward the wagon.

Noon grabbed her by the wrist and spun her around. "What we got here?" He took the bundle, unknotted it and dumped the contents on the blanket. Dropping to one knee, he pawed out a small leather bag, which yielded a dozen or so \$30 gold *onzas* to his searching fingers. "You win this honest, or rob the till?"

Andy doubled his fists but Liza froze him with her voice. "Andy, don't!"

"That's a real smart girl." Noon's hand brushed one walnut gun butt, then reached into the mound of clothing and trinkets. With an odd, hot-eyed smile he came erect again, holding a white dress. It looked to Will like silk or some expensive material, with a kind of veil attached and a billowing tent of a skirt. And suddenly, sickeningly, he knew what it had to be.

"Dog my cats," Noon said. "A weddin' dress!" He held



it up to his shoulders and laughed. "Ever see the like, Mase? All them frills an' doodads. What we need's a preacher."

Mase Rett chuckled. "I got a ring."

"More fun than a hangin'." Noon shoved the dress in Liza's arms. "Ain't you the blushing bride, my oh my! Put it on. Give us a treat."

Andy made a choking sound deep in his throat and Noon stabbed him with a look of glee. "Got a burr under your tail, Reb? Why don't you pick up a rock and bash my brains out? Like you done to that lieutenant."

As Will edged toward the wagon, keeping it between him and Rett, he was afraid Andy might bang off like a fire-cracker. But Andy stood there, a sick shamed torment in his eyes. "Reckon he's caught a case of yellow fever," Noon said. "Come on, honey. Strip for us."

Liza's face went white as the wedding gown.

"Be a sport. Ollie wants to see you all diked out in your pretties."

Liza had her control back, that sub-zero calm Will had seen across the faro layout. She looked at Noon, through him, as though he'd made a tinhorn's ten-cent bet, her green eyes chill with contempt. Noon's grin wilted. For a second Will thought she might back him off but Noon couldn't stop now. He was breathing hard and his stare twitched back and forth over the curve of her breasts.

"I asked you nice. Now I'm telling you."

Liza didn't move.

"Don't look down your nose at me, hooker! Take it off." Noon thrust his jaw forward. "Or I'll strip you myself."

"Sonny," she said, and smiled a wicked little smile, "haven't you ever seen an undressed female before?" She lifted one hand to the front of her dress and unfastened the top button. Will caught a glimpse of milk white flesh that ended in the modest covering of her camisole. Still smiling into Noon's bugged-out eyes, she undid the second button. Then she hurled the wedding dress in his face.

A blood red mist seemed to film Will's vision. With three long steps he rounded the end of the wagon, where Noon

was cursing and pawing at the folds of silk. Rett and Chili were braying with laughter. Even Andy had a weak foolish grin. Will didn't see any of them. In that moment all he saw was Ollie Noon. All he wanted to do was kill him.

He hit Noon in the belly, hit him in the face, battered at him with great, wild sledging blows. He drove Noon against the wagon, hammered him to the ground, and then Liza was hauling at his arm, crying, "Stop it, Will! Stop! He's unconscious."

Slowly the world slid back into focus. He was standing over Noon, looking down into a bloodied face. He was shaking like a man with ague, soaked with sweat. The white dress, smeared with dirt and blood, lay under Noon's body. Noon had never had a chance to use his gun. He stared at his knuckles, which already had begun to swell, then around at the half circle of faces—Andy, Chili, Rett. They all seemed like strangers.

Rett said, "You fight a pretty good fight—with a man half your size."

Will rubbed a sleeve across his face. He'd been the one to blow up. Not Andy. Andy had been the one to play it smart and careful this time. He'd given a man a merciless beating. Not just any man—Ollie Noon. He'd been in fights before, a few, but never over a woman. And not just any woman. Andy's woman.

Rett knelt down and felt Noon here and there. "Guess you didn't bust anything, Colladay. He'll come 'round."

"Your boys fight pretty good too," Will said. "With women."

"Now you mention it," Rett said, "I have a proposition. Only we even up the odds." He straightened and glanced at Liza. "You're a sporting woman, ma'am. How'd you like to bet that your Texas friend here can't knock out Chili."

Liza's breath caught. "You wouldn't! Not even you!"

"Chili."

"Señor?"

"Take off your shirt."

Chili's puzzled scowl gave way to a piggish grin. He pulled his shirt off over his head and tossed it on a wagon

wheel. Bare-chested and hairless, shiny with sweat, he looked like some fat, greased Oriental god. But Will saw the thick cords of his arms, the muscle sheath under the blubber. He knew, with dismal certainty, how this would end. "No sense to this," he said. "You'll need us both if we run into Injuns."

"He *is* Injun. Any bets, lady?"

In a tight low voice Liza said, "Haven't you done enough hurt for one day?"

Rett smiled. "Go on, Chili. Take him."

Chili came at Will with a lazy slope-shouldered walk, but all his shame and misery of this day burned in his eyes. Will backed off, maneuvering for space, and Chili slapped him with a force that knocked him into the seep. He got up, stunned and shaken, and drove a fist into Chili's stomach with all his strength. It felt like a sack of wet sand, soft-hard, and the shock shot clear up his arm. Chili grunted, pushed him away and tapped him again. Will's head rocked back. He didn't see the next blow coming, nor the next.

He tried to cover up, dodge the mallets that pounded him and drove him back against the rocks. The sky seemed to burst, explode into crazy red and yellow sun streaks that dazzled the inner eye before snuffing out to blackness. He had a sensation of falling through space, and then nothing.

During her years in mining camps Liza had witnessed brutality of all kinds. She had seen men shot and knifed and battered senseless for a pinch of gold dust, or less. She was as hardened to violence, she believed, as any decent woman could be and still retain a conscience. Her husband Jack had died by violence. It had become a part of her life and she accepted it, along with other hazards of her profession.

But as she looked down at Will Colladay's unconscious form now, a storm of fear shook her. Not for herself, nor for Andy. But for Will. The thought of the beating he had undergone, for her sake, was almost more than she could bear. It was Rett she feared, far more than Ollie Noon, and what he might do next. In a day filled with horrors the worst had been this man's smiling cruelty. The Ollie Noons

bragged and blustered and made their cheap nasty threats, but Mason Rett was wickedness itself, beyond the human pale.

Rett prodded Will with a toe and motioned Chili back. "Did a nice job on him, Chili," he said. "Next time he won't get so frisky."

Chili made a grimace that might have passed for satisfaction. The only mark on him was a faint pink stain above his belt.

Liza knelt down beside Will and said to Andy, "Help me lift him."

"Get him on his feet," Rett said. "We're leaving soon as he and Noon can sit a horse."

Together she and Andy carried him over to the wagon. With a dampened cloth she moistened his face, washed away the blood from a cut above one eye. She did not speak to Andy, nor he to her. The constraint between them suddenly seemed a gulf. All that mattered was Will. She forced a little water between his teeth, shook him and gently slapped his cheeks. She must revive him quickly because, without Will—and she knew this in her mind and heart—she was surely lost.

He recovered sooner than she'd dared to hope, sitting up and holding his head between his hands. Finally he got to his feet and leaned against the wagon for support, then took a few shaky steps. Ollie Noon was up too now, but after one look at Will's face he limped away. "Will," she said. "Will—" But something happened to her voice.

Andy forced a laugh. "Can't keep a Colladay down for long. Seems our season to get knocked in the head."

Will looked at her. "Noon, he didn't—touch you?"

Mutely she shook her head.

"How come you to fizz up like that, boy?" Andy said. "After all the rawhidin' you gave me."

Andy, she thought, don't talk so much. Don't make it any worse. For Will. For me. For yourself. Can't you understand?

"Next time you go to pick a fight," Andy said, "let me have a piece. We don't want no dead heroes."

Will put a hand on Andy's shoulder. "Now who's in the pulpit?" he said, and managed a grin that pained her to watch.

"I would've jumped him," Andy insisted. "Liza knows I would. But Rett had a gun on me all the time."

"Sure, Andy. Sure you would. Now forget it."

Rett was calling them to get a move on, although it was not yet dark, and as Will turned away she touched his arm. "Will—"

"Yes?"

"Will, I—I— You're not too badly hurt?" It wasn't what she meant to say, but she hoped he could read her eyes.

"'Bloody but unbowed.' Who said that?"

She was able to smile a little. "It might be Shakespeare. He said almost everything. Will, take care, promise me."

He nodded and went to the horses. From the stiff awkward way he held himself she knew that it hurt him to move, but he waved Andy off and mounted without aid. The others climbed into their saddles then, always careful to keep their rifles within quick reach, and she heard Rett ask how far to the water.

"Fifteen miles or so," Will said. "If we find it."

"You'll find it," Rett said.

Liza watched the three El Monte men, willing herself not to panic. They would kill Will, she knew, if they dared. Any one of them would kill him. But for now he was their one salvation. He knew the waterholes. He knew the secrets of this hateful land. And so they would spare him, let him live on sufferance. Until they didn't need him any more.

On her knees she gathered up her scattered clothes and keepsakes, the trinkets she had carried from Los Angeles, and which now were as useless as her hoard of *onzas*. All her gold wouldn't buy one drink of cold fresh water. The white silk gown, which her seamstress had so lovingly sewn, seemed the most ridiculous of all. Could she, Liza Kincaid, have been that same sentimental woman who, not so long ago, daydreamed of a big church wedding and a tender

handsome groom? Or was that another part of this nightmare? Grabbing the dress from the dirt, she crammed it back into her bundle, and climbed to the wagon seat.

From his horse Andy looked down at her and quickly looked away, and then they were moving once more. Single file they rode out of the mesquite thicket, with Will in the lead, and plodded on across the desert, southeast toward Fort Yuma, old Mexico, Texas. Toward what else, she wondered. Twilight faded into night, the moon rose, and dust enveloped them in a thick gritty mist. The saguaros took on weird shapes, like evil, multi-armed giants, and the spindly ocotillo stalks were mammoth spider legs. Once she thought she saw the glow of fire, miles distant on some peak, and she shivered, recalling Will's talk about Apaches.

They stopped, and stopped again, while Will scouted ahead, and each time Ollie Noon drew up beside the wagon to watch her with, she knew, one hand near his gun. They were climbing now but all this country had a deadly sameness to her, and she marveled that even Will could find landmarks to guide them through. Great rocks loomed on either side and the wagon slid and jolted from ledge to ledge, its dry axles screeching with every revolution. Once the men had to unhitch and lower the wagon by rope over thirty feet of cliff. Cursing and sweating down below, they harnessed up again and clattered on through another canyon. She closed her eyes and gave the mules their head.

Near daybreak they pulled to a halt in a shallow rocky depression. Not a bush or scrap of vegetation grew anywhere. Liza had never seen such a desolate spot, nor imagined there could be one. There was nothing but endless rock. Numb with exhaustion, she watched Will dismount and examine the ground. He circled back and forth, then climbed up among some boulders and disappeared. Within three minutes he was back. She saw him shake his head, but she would have known anyway, from the heaviness of his walk. They all knew. The spring or seep or tank or whatever he'd been searching for was dry. There wasn't any water here.

She heard Rett's voice rise in argument, answered by

Will's quiet tone. Then the little knot of men broke up and Will walked back to the wagon with Rett at his heel. "Give me those canteens," Rett told her. "From now on I'm taking over what water we got."

"Let her have a drink, Rett."

"She'll wait. Like the rest of us." He took the two half-empty canteens she handed him and carried them to his horse.

Liza said, "I can stand it, Will. I'm not too thirsty yet."

"We'll lay over here a bit," he said. "The horses are played out."

"There's one thing I *can't* stand, though. Not knowing. Tell me the truth," she asked.

His gaze shifted over the rocks and came back to her. She knew his answer would be honest. He didn't have it in him to prettify the truth. He said, "Next place I know of's a long twenty miles. Bill Williams River. But this time of year it could be dry too."

"And beyond that?"

"That's as far as I've ever gone. South of there I'll be hunting water blind. But the 'Paches don't go down there either. They keep north of the Williams."

"Apaches?" Fear squeezed up in her throat again.

"I spotted a fire in the mountains last night. Signal fire."

She remembered how his wife had died, how he had warred against Apaches for years. Perhaps his hatred of them made him look for danger where there was none. A man like Will Colladay must have his private devils, some imagined and some real. "I saw that fire too," she said. "Miles away."

"In this country they can out-travel a horse. Cover eighty-ninety miles a day on a handful of pinole. But once we get across that canyon—" His voice softened. "Hold on one more day?"

She nodded. "If you can."

"Good girl. Get some rest now."

He would have left her then, but she said, "Last night—when you fought with Noon—why did you?"

"Should've killed him in the first place, like Andy wanted. We wouldn't be here now."

"You couldn't kill a man in cold blood, Will. I know you better than that."

He was staring at her so closely she felt the color rising in her face. "Then you know why," he said. "There's a thing or two I can't stand myself."

After he had gone she curled up in the back of the wagon, holding to the sound of his words. Illogically, foolishly perhaps, she felt reassured in the simple fact that he was near by, a shield between her and harm. Somewhere she had heard or read that dawn was the favorite hour for an Indian attack. But Will was out there watching over her. It seemed as though he'd always been there. She closed her eyes and slept.

The tortured braying of the mules wakened her. Sunlight striking through the canvas told her it was early morning, the birth of another fearsome, heat-racked day. It was so long since she had bathed, or even washed, that her clothes felt like a crusty outer skin. She smiled grimly, thinking how fastidious about her appearance she had been. The patrons of the Red Ox would not recognize her now.

She stepped out and put a pebble under her tongue, as Will had told her, but saliva was no substitute for water. She had never been so thirsty. The men were asleep over by the horses, all but Ollie Noon, who sat on a rock cleaning one of his revolvers. Through eyes swollen almost shut he watched, but did not follow when she left the wagon. Climbing up some boulders, she came to the dry pothole, a natural tank to catch and store whatever rain that fell. The bleached skeleton of a coyote lay on the bottom.

From this high point she could see the green band of the Colorado far to the westward and the distant shore that was California. To the south, the direction they must go, a broken land of canyons and mesas stretched to the horizon. Already the magic of its mauves and pinks and buffs was fading into a brassy glare that dazzled her eyes. Not a bird, nor hawk or turkey buzzard hovered in the sky. It was truly, she thought with revulsion, a land of death.



"Liza."

She gave a start as Andy slipped up behind her. He caught her to him, kissed her roughly on the mouth, but after a moment she wriggled free and stepped back. He was grinning at her, that boyish twist of the lips she knew so well, and he said, "What's wrong? You used to like that."

"Don't, Andy," she said. "Please. Not now."

"Can't a man kiss his girl?"

"I guess so," she said wearily. "Let's go back."

"Wait." He caught her arm. "You givin' me the freeze? Because of what happened last night?"

"That's over and done with. Do we have to talk about it?"

"You think I should've jumped Noon, don't you? Instead of Will. Is that what you think?"

She shook her head. He'd been brooding about it ever since, she realized, tormenting himself. In his own eyes he'd been humiliated. And now his pride would not let him be.

"Yes, you do," he said bitterly. "Ole gutless wonder Colladay. That's me. Let Will do it. Big brother Will."

"Andy, stop this. Nobody's accusing you."

"I'm accusin' me. Didn't lift a finger while that ape beat his face in. Stood there and let him take his lumps."

"What else could you do?"

Savagely he kicked at a rock, a moody petulant expression on his face. This was still another side to him, one she hadn't seen. A humble Andy, almost abject. But was it true humility? Or had he come to her only for comfort and solace. "The past's past," she said. "We've got to think ahead."

"You even talk like Will now," he said. "Wasn't so long ago you wanted to scratch his eyes out."

"This won't get us anywhere, Andy. I'm going down to the wagon."

"Yeah, back to Will. The great White Father." His lips twisted in that grin again. "Maybe you got a notion to switch your bet in the Colladay sweepstakes, huh? Figure he's a better risk."

"That's so childish I won't argue with you."

"Childish? Don't tell me you haven't been playin' up to him."

Watching his face, she knew she didn't have the strength left in her to go through this with him again and again. He would always be coming to her with his hurts and humiliations and jealousies. And in that moment she felt a deep aching pity for him. Pity for his weakness, pity for that quick easy charm of his which had so attracted her once. He was like a boy who needed mothering. What she needed—what her whole being cried out for—was a man, a man who could give her strength and love. Pity wasn't enough.

"You're worn out," she said. "Sick with the heat, and worry. We all are. It's no time to talk."

"Don't go feelin' sorry for me. I don't need any nurse. I'll show you."

Startled that he had guessed her mind so readily, she said, "Show me what?"

"Never mind." A wild reckless light glowed in his eyes. "I'll show you both. Will too."

He swung away from her and started down the rocks. "Andy!" she cried, and hurried after him. He stopped so abruptly she bumped against him. Hat brim yanked down to shade his eyes, he was staring off across the desert. Following the direction of his gaze, she saw smoke. A wispy column, from the first high point eastward, writhed up against the sky and lost itself in tatters. Held by an awful fascination, Liza watched the next gray puff, and the next.

Andy cupped his hands and yelled to the camp below. "Apaches!"

Captain Byron Wingfield rode back into Los Angeles from El Monte on a sultry July afternoon, with a saddlebag full of papers he had impounded from a safe found on the premises of Mason Rett. Ordinarily the entry and search of a private home would have been repugnant to him, a violation of all his principles. But Rett was no ordinary private citizen. And this, Wingfield had to keep reminding himself, was war. A damn poor shabby excuse for the real

thing, from his viewpoint, but nevertheless—war. Extreme measures were justified.

Seven days ago poor John Sumner had been buried, with full military honors. His murderer, Andy Colladay, was still at large. And Wingfield was still smarting from the reprimand he had received only yesterday from the general himself. Was he, or was he not, security officer for the District of Southern California? What action had he taken to apprehend this killer, this treasonable hound who had escaped the stockade? Could he report any progress whatsoever? By Wingfield's reply had been a very red-faced negative.

He was seething now as he rode up to the Main Street warehouse and dismounted. He hadn't asked for this job. He was a field soldier, not some glorified snoop. He belonged out with the troops. But by thunder, he'd catch Andy Colladay! Catch him and drag him in by the heels. Then ask for a transfer to combat duties.

He flung his reins to an orderly and entered his bake-oven of an office, the saddlebag under one arm. Mase Rett and his two hangers-on had been gone for a week now, disappeared as completely as the Colladay brothers. Even that lead, the only promising one he had, seemed to have aborted. Rett, he imagined, had taken fright and lit a shuck for points south. And he'd been so sure of Rett, too. The man would do anything for money.

His duty sergeant came in then with the day's accumulation of paper work. Five suspicious travelers had been seen on the road to San Diego. A householder reported that one of her boarders kept a small Confederate flag in his bureau drawer. A merchant had overheard some gossip about a marching society that held secret night drills on the La Brea plains. Wingfield groaned. There was no end to this trivia. But no hint, not the slightest clue to the whereabouts of Will and Andy Colladay. Somehow they had slipped through his net again.

"There's a lieutenant to see you, sir," the sergeant said. "A Lieutenant Crowthwaite."

"Crowthwaite? What's he want?"

"Didn't say, cap'n."

"Let him cool his heels then."

With a sigh Wingfield undid the top buttons of his jacket and emptied the contents of the saddlebag on his desk. He did not expect to learn much, if anything. The nature of Rett's business was such that he would be most unlikely to keep written records of his transactions. But Wingfield waded doggedly into the assortment of miscellany. About halfway through he found an envelope which contained three items of interest: a promissory note to the amount of four thousand dollars, signed by Will Colladay; a list of supplies; and some sort of quit claim deed, complete with legal description, to a parcel of land, again signed by Will. The full meaning of this eluded him for a moment, but one thing was pikestaff plain. Rett had financed the Colladays' escape.

Rett had lied to him. Rett had given aid and comfort to the enemy—knowingly. Which made him a fugitive too. But apparently he intended to return, otherwise he'd not have left valuable papers behind.

The sergeant was at the door again. "That lieutenant, sir, he says—"

Wingfield peered up at an apple-cheeked second lieutenant in the doorway. He was dusty and rumped, as though from a long hot ride, and obviously in mortal fear of Captain Byron Wingfield. "I have to see you, sir!" he bleated. "It—it may be urgent."

Wingfield couldn't place the man. A volunteer, he supposed, one of these new-fangled recruits. They were practically robbing the cradle nowadays. "Come in, come in," he barked.

The lieutenant stood at ramrod attention until Wingfield waved him to the only other chair in the room. He sat on the edge of it, nervously balancing his forage cap on one knee. "I—I—" he began, took a deep breath and stopped.

"You sure you have the right office, lieutenant?" Wingfield said. "The quartermaster depot is two blocks—"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir." Crowthwaite gave his cap an

agonized twist. "You see, sir, my station is the guard post at Sawpit Pass, up in the mountains. It's very isolated there. We don't get much news from outside. But last night the courier brought us word to be on the lookout for a woman, a dangerous accomplice of two Secesh."

Wingfield listened absently, impatient to get back to his work.

"So when I heard that, sir, it made me think. Maybe I did wrong. But I left my post and rode all night to get here. I had to tell you, sir."

"Tell me what?"

"That I let a woman through the pass last week."

Wingfield bit down so hard on his pipe he snapped the stem.

The rest of the story came out in a self-recriminating flood. How a "Mormon" and his "fifth wife" had lost the trail en route to Salt Lake, and how Lieutenant Crowthwaite set them straight. The date, the description tallied perfectly. Speechless, By Wingfield stared at him. He would have taken an oath that nothing so preposterous could happen in his command. You worked and schemed, deployed hundreds of men, planned the minutest details of organization. And then some jackanapes of a boy, whose mother had taught him to be courteous to women, slit your throat from ear to ear.

"Lieutenant, didn't it occur to you to search that wagon?"

"N—no, sir."

Wingfield had a wife and three children back in Ohio. On his pay he could not afford such establishments as the Red Ox, even if his taste had run that way. But he hoped, very much indeed, that someday he would meet this Liza Kincaid. Between his teeth he said, "Do you know that proverb about closing the barn door?"

The lieutenant gulped and nodded.

Wingfield turned to the big map tacked on his wall. Ten days. By now the Colladays and that woman could be anywhere. Well beyond his reach, on their way to join the Confederacy. Then he turned back to the lieutenant, who seemed to have shrunk six inches in his chair.

Wingfield cleared his throat. He'd been this age himself once, as green as verdigris. He was thirty-six now. And only yesterday he'd been flayed by a major general for making the same kind of blunder. There was a lesson for both of them in this: Never underestimate the enemy.

"Son," he said with a gentleness that surprised himself, "are you planning on a military career?"

The lieutenant blinked. "Yes, sir. That is, I was—"

"Then let me give you a piece of advice. Whenever you make a mistake, as you did in passing that wagon without search, own up. Don't alibi yourself. Spit it out. But don't make the same mistake twice." Wingfield managed a meager fishhook smile. "It took gumption to do what you've just done, when you could've kept your mouth shut."

Crowthwaite stared back at him like a hypnotized rabbit.

"Now get out of here. Go back to your post."

After the lieutenant had gone, quavery with relief, Wingfield slammed his pipe on the desk and glowered at the map. If the general got wind of this the old man would heave them both in the stockade. But never let yourself be caught without an alternate route of attack—Cooke's *Tactics*, a dog-eared copy of which lay beside his tobacco pouch. Given the basic elements, Wingfield could read a map and analyze a problem in logistics with professional expertise. He too had crossed the Mojave in summertime.

For the next few minutes he tilted back in his chair and stared at the muslin ceiling, while his mind ran through a series of precise calculations that involved mileage, water-holes and feed for horses. In addition, he had one fact that would have been unknown to either Colladay. The abandonment of Fort Mojave and the upper Colorado was still a high-level secret, part of the War Department's strategy to concentrate its limited force for the defense of Southern California. Any man arriving in that region today would find himself in a perilous situation, even a man as resourceful as Will Colladay.

This hypothetical man, this Mister X of the equation, would have two choices for survival. Two and only two. To return to California or proceed downriver.

"Sergeant!"

"Sir?"

"When does the next courier leave for Fort Yuma with dispatches?"

"Right after retreat, cap'n."

By Wingfield smiled, the first time he had genuinely felt like smiling in nearly two weeks. He was getting out of this office, into action again, if it cost him a major's brevet. "Sergeant," he said, and rubbed his hands together, "have a fresh horse saddled for me. I'm riding escort for that courier. To Fort Yuma."

The smoke wavered against the morning sky, drifting upward, and was gone. No more appeared. Watching from the rocks, Will estimated the distance at about ten miles, although in this dry superheated air it looked closer to five. So the fire last night had been a signal fire. He'd called it right. To Rett he said, "They know we see 'em and they don't care."

"What's that mean?"

"Prob'ly that a big bunch is on the way. But you never can be sure with an Apache."

"Then we better fort up right here." Rett said.

"How long do you think we'd last on three quarts of water?" Will climbed back down into the hollow, where Andy, Noon and Chili were hastily catching up the horses. He guessed they had at least two hours. Two hours might take them halfway to the Bill Williams. And it just might be that the Apaches would palaver. But Apaches weren't Mojaves. These were horse Indians, like their eastern cousins, who would fight afoot or mounted like nothing mortal.

"Andy," he said, "ride in the wagon with Liza. If we have to run for it—"

"You figure I'm pretty good at runnin', don't you?" Andy said. But he climbed to the seat and took the reins.

Will swung up to his saddle. The horses were in sorry shape, after days of scrubby feed. They didn't have much run left, no more did the mules. If the country got much

rougher he'd have to leave the wagon and most of the supplies. Mule meat was a prime Apache delicacy. In a pinch he might bargain with them. But in a fight— He looked around the camp. Rett had one Sharps across his saddle bow, a second in the boot, and Noon had the other pair, while Chili carried an old Henry. All three had hand guns too.

"How about a truce for now, Rett? You can't shoot more 'n one rifle at a time."

"I'd sooner trust an Apache," Rett said. "Even one I can't see."

They rode out of the depression, not strung out in file but bunched around the wagon. The canyon walls gradually fell away and Will found an arroyo that led to the comparatively flat tableland, where they were able to turn south once more. There was no smoke, no telltale streamers of dust, but he knew these people were masters at swift movement. How they did it baffled and bedeviled you. They found concealment where you'd swear none existed, blending into the desert. And he felt again that dry scaly fear he'd known on his first Apache scout, a fear that took him back to Maria and his time of hating. It hadn't died in all these years.

His gaze swung back and forth in a hundred-and-eighty-degree arc, back and forth. The first hour passed. The horses grew skittish, sensing the tension of their riders. The endless squeal of the axles rasped at nerves. They dropped down into a wash, pulled and hauled the wagon out of hub-deep sand, cursing at the delay, and crawled on toward the next mountain range. A ridge that looked like some giant rust-streaked cinder left to cool, humped up to their right. It was a landmark Will recalled.

In the lead, he signaled for a halt and rode forward. Another deep arroyo, invisible from a few yards back, cut across their line of march. He sat above the steep bank and his gaze traveled along the bottom as he tried to pick a route for the wagon. A jackrabbit bounded out of the scrub and shot from sight. This was just unusual enough to hold him there a minute or two longer, motionless and



listening. Then a barely audible sound from below caught his ear. His horse shied and tossed its head. A column of Indians trotted into view around the next dogleg of the arroyo, a hundred yards away.

They saw Will, skylined on the edge, the same split second he saw them. From his down-angle they looked dwarfed, stunted little men on stubby ponies, in breach clouts and knee-length leggings. Like toys, Kachina dolls, that tame Indians' kids played with around the trading posts. He had that crazy flash impression and then a howl went up. They'd snaked their way almost to the wagon, crawling along below the desert floor, and they hadn't come to palaver. By the grace of a rabbit he'd spoiled their ambush.

Their bows were coming up, bending deep, as he wheeled around and flattened over the withers. He socked in his spurs and rode for the wagon. Rett had jogged part way out and Will yelled at him, "The ridge! Make for that ridge!"

The lead Apaches came boiling out of the arroyo some distance behind, beyond bowshot range. Rett took one astonished look, brought up his Sharps and fired, then raced after Will. The two mules, caught up in the panic, were lunging at their harness, fighting Andy and the reins. "Get the wagon up there," Will shouted at him. "Maybe we can hold 'em off."

Ollie Noon sat his horse like a statue, frozen with fear. Will pulled up beside him, leaned out and jerked the carbine from the boot. At that Noon came unstuck. He whirled and galloped after the wagon. Will thumbed a linen cartridge into the Sharps, peered through the leaf sight, and squeezed the trigger. These '59 models would reach out five hundred yards, but it was a lucky scratch shot that dumped one of the on-rushing ponies. The rider fell clear and rolled behind a rock. Rett's rifle crashed again, along with Chili's Henry, and a second horse went down. The Apaches veered off then and dropped back out of range. At a dead run Will struck out for the ridge, trailing Rett and Chili.

Up near the crest, where rocks had stopped the wagon, they piled off their horses. It wasn't much for defense, Will saw at a glance—a long narrow hogback that sheered off on the back side—but better than the open flat. Five men could hold it, for a while. Maybe through one day, till dark. If their ammunition lasted. "Get that other rifle," he told Andy. "And, Liza, you keep down. They'll have some rifles too. Smooth-bores likely, but they can shoot."

She nodded and crept behind a boulder. The others scattered among the rocks and watched the Indians below. A few of the younger bucks raced their horses in close, shouting insults and waving their bows, but the main force held back, sixty to seventy in all. They milled about in what seemed to be, but was not, an aimless pattern, then five riders broke from the big group.

"Hold your fire!"

Five abreast they skimmed across the flat, flogging their mounts, and pounded up the ridge. Will took up his trigger slack. He could see their copper bodies plainly now, their head rags streaming out behind, the knotted jaw ropes they used for reins. That headlong charge was magnificent, terrifying, as they intended it to be. The screeching alone could paralyze a man. He'd seen it before, or something like it. They felt you out first, then came back to hack you up in pieces.

But Ollie Noon got buck fever. His Sharps boomed out and a ricochet whined off a rock far below. The Apaches brought their ponies to a rearing stop, wheeled and retreated. Bellied down beside him, Andy said, "Doesn't take a lot to scare 'em off. One shot."

"That was just a fishing trip."

"They sure didn't learn much."

"They'll be back."

For some time nothing happened. Out on the flats Indians rode slowly back and forth, singly and in bands. After the first attack they seemed strangely quiet. They hadn't expected a fight like this, Will knew; they preferred a surprise strike to a siege. Slash and run, that was their style.

But nine horses and a wagonful of white man's goods was a prize that didn't often come their way. Time was all on their side.

The next attack came suddenly. About thirty of them whipped their ponies up the ridge in a ragged skirmish line. They didn't whoop or screech as before. This was an all-out try to overrun the summit and finish off the White Eyes quickly. Will fired and missed, reloaded and fired, and knocked down his flying target. The other rifles were crashing to his right and left long before the Apaches rode within bowshot, but they rammed straight ahead. Two hundred yards. A hundred. Eighty. He saw one Apache fling up an arm and fall. A riderless horse loomed in his sights. He tracked a brown figure sprinting for the rocks and overshot again.

Now the Apaches were shooting back, bows against breech-loaders, and an arrow shattered beside his head. An unhorsed Indian jumped to a rock with his throwing ax up-raised and Will shot him through the chest. It was all the fire fights he had ever known, squeezed into a few flaming seconds—rifles roaring, horses squealing, the stink of gun powder, bullets ricocheting, the bite of fear in his vitals. It was kill or be killed, die or live, and the carbine barrel hot enough to burn his hand. And then it ended, as abruptly as it began.

Thirty yards below the ridge top the Apache line wavered and broke. The ones still mounted, turned and fled down to the flats, some riding double. Will counted four bodies left behind and two ponies smashed among the rocks. Another unreal quiet closed over the slope. Down below the two groups flowed together and he thought: Now. Now they'll all hit us in a bunch. We can't stop that many. Here they come again.

But after a minute they began to withdraw. Unbelievably he watched them straggle off toward the arroyo. With a yell Noon got to his feet. "Yea! They're pullin' out!"

Rett and Chili stood up too, peering down at the haze of dust. Andy glanced at Will and cocked an eyebrow. Will

shook his head. "They won't quit that easy. It's a trick."

Andy said, "But how come—" and an arrow whistled past and ripped into the wagon top.

Will shouted, "Down!" but the next arrow took Chili in the throat. The big breed made a whimpering noise and pitched forward. Will squirmed behind another rock and stared down the west face of the ridge, the blind side he'd been too busy to watch. Under cover of their attacks the Apaches must have sent a buck or two circling around and climbing up from behind. He saw nothing at first, but then a tiny roil of settling dust beside a close-in sage clump caught his eye.

He waited, waited for a glimpse of arm or shoulder, but this one was lying doggo now. Only one, he guessed, although others might be hidden farther down. He fired into the thickest part of the bush. Something that looked more like a bundle of sticks than a human creature flopped out into the open and was still.

Chili lay where he had fallen. Rett crawled over to him. "He's—dead."

Will looked at the body, then at Rett's stony face, wondering if the man felt anything. He'd led Chili around like a tame bear on a chain, led him here to die. He'd made Chili perform once too often. Likely he'd be more cut up losing a pet dog.

"Poor devil," Noon said. "Died cold sober too."

Will turned away. That left four of them to hold the ridge. Four men and Liza. The Apaches had paid five for one. The odds were narrowing down.

They divided one canteen, with Rett doling out each meager swallow in a cup. Nobody suggested eating. Noon-day sun beat down on the rocks. A good half of the Apaches had disappeared into the arroyo. The others split into small bands and rode off, until only a few remained in sight.

"What they up to now?" Andy asked.

"They'll throw a loop around the ridge."

"While we sit here and let 'em sneak up and pick us off?"

"Dark," Will said. "We can't bust out till dark."

"That's a long time from now."

"Nine hours. They figure it's cheaper to outwait us."

During the next hour or so he saw several clots of dust west and north of the ridge, but the Indians kept under cover in folds of the desert. Twice he heard faint distant owl hoots as they signaled to each other. And, oddly, he thought of By Wingfield. He wished he had Wingfield up here, behind one of those rifles. In a fix like this he couldn't think of any better man.

He worked down the few yards to the wagon, where the horses stood with drooping ears, and made sure their ties were tight. Wanting horses as they did, the Apaches had been careful not to hit them. He transferred some rations from the grub box to saddlebags. Everything else he'd have to leave behind when the time came. The wagon. Mules. An empty water barrel. A man called Chili, with two feet of shaft in his neck.

The afternoon dragged by. They lay behind the rocks and watched the sun's slow swing across the sky, waiting for dark. Only one Indian could be seen now, sitting his horse out on the flats. Gradually the hard light began to fade, touching the desert with color and bringing the farthest mountains into sharp relief. By imperceptible degrees the heat slackened. Will rubbed his aching eyes and glanced around at the others.

Liza had fallen asleep with her long hair spilling over her face, but nothing she did surprised him any more. Noon was staring at her, licking a cigarette together, and Rett was studying the ridge. Rett and Noon, two left out of the three. The Apaches had shortened those odds too.

Then Andy called him over. "See that ledge down there? 'Bout a hundred yards."

Will nodded.

"I been watching it the last half hour. Keep hearing noises."

"What sort of noises?" Will said.

"Maybe gravel falling. Loose rock. Hard to tell. But I got a sneaky feeling our red brothers ain't waitin' for sundown."

Will took a long look. That ledge could be the cap

rock of a gully. It could head up the big arroyo. Granting that, a raft of Indians could've wormed up there on their bellies. Trouble was, they could have crawled up a dozen other places. And he didn't have rounds enough to go shooting into every suspicious shadow. "Maybe I better mosey down that way."

"Maybe you better not." Andy turned on his side. "Funny the things a man gets to thinking when he's scared. Real deep down scared."

"You and me too."

"An' then, after a while, you're all scared out. Like those 'dobe bricks old Pedro used to make back home. You crack or end up solid baked."

"Sure, I remember. He'd mix straw in with his mud. They'd last a hundred years."

"And that stud Pa had when we were kids," Andy said. "Remember him? I dared you to ride him once and you told me to go suck eggs."

"You're the one who rode him. Or tried to. And busted your collar bone."

"Pa hided me good for that." Andy looked off toward the ledge again. "I'm goin' part way down there, Will. For a look."

"Now wait—"

"I'm no good at waiting," Andy said. "Never was. Couldn't even wait for Liza. She—Will, get her off this ridge tonight. You're the only one who can." He slid the rifle forward. "Cover me."

Andy slithered around his rock and crawled along the spine of the ridge. For a minute Will followed his slow inching progress, then Andy vanished in a hollow. Deep shadow was creeping over the upper slope. In this tricky half-light Will could imagine a painted face behind every boulder, but no sound came from the ledge below. The horses were quiet too, giving no sign of nervousness, as they might if they caught a sudden whiff of Indian, that potent smell of sweat and grease and smoke and bird lime and the Lord knew what all. Smelled better than some

whites he could name, though. But what was keeping Andy? He'd been gone a long quarter hour.

Will had decided to go down after him, when Andy crawled out of the hollow and climbed back among the rocks. He'd ripped both knees out of his britches and his face was black with sweat-runneled dust. But he grinned, looking like some red-eyed minstrel man in burnt cork, and said, "You ain't the only wizard in this tribe, boy."

"What'd you find?"

"The whole shebang. Like I figured, they're bunched in a little draw below that ledge. They had all afternoon to crawl in there." Andy took a deep breath. "But any time now they'll turn loose and hit us."

Will glanced up at the purpling sky. "Did you see their horses?"

"That's what took so long. I crawled a piece farther to get me a look at that big arroyo. And here's the pretty part. They left their horse herd down there, a long ways down. If we get the jump on 'em—"

"They must've left some horse guards."

"I spotted three. But we'll catch the main bunch flat-footed. We'll have a two-mile start before they ever reach their horses. Be near dark by then."

"Sure they didn't see you?"

"If they had I'd still be there—with an arrow in me."

Any time now, Will thought bleakly. Any minute, any second, they'll break out of that draw, fifty or sixty howling bucks. They'd left their herd down below because they didn't like the risk of losing more horses. Horses were harder to come by than men in this country. So they were afoot now, dismounted cavalry, all in place to swarm over the ridge top in a final close-quarters charge.

"Andy," he said. Andy had been the one to scout them, scout them and come back. Andy, who wanted to soldier for Jeff Davis and wear a butternut uniform. How did you tell your kid brother what *you* were thinking? He grinned a little too then, hoping that Andy understood. "I wish we

had that old stud now. He was orn'ry. But he could outrun any horse around."

"That's how I feel—orn'ry." Andy reached for his rifle. "Off your rump, boy. Texas, here we come."

"You take Liza. I'll get Rett and Noon."

He edged over to Rett's position and told him the plan. It wasn't much of a plan. All they could do was run, run till the horses dropped, and pray they weren't cut off. But he thought of one improvement. Rett listened to him, nodded and passed the word on to Noon. "I'll go first," Will said. "But stick close behind me, and keep low. If they see us before we reach the horses, run for it."

"Not me!" Noon said. "It's still light. I'm not moving off this rock till dark."

"You hold the fort with Chili then."

Will crept through the rocks toward the wagon and their horses. It occurred to him that he'd never asked Liza if she could ride a horse, but somehow he knew she could. That woman could do anything. All was silent down by the ledge, not a whisper of sound. Even now it was hard to believe there could be an Apache for miles. If Andy hadn't been on the alert— But how much longer would the Indians wait? Till the last gleam of light faded from the sky? They knew this terrain. They had every edge, night or day.

He crouched behind a wagon wheel until Andy and the others crawled up beside him. "You get lonely up there, Ollie?" he said to Noon.

There were five saddled horses and he untied their reins, then cut the ropes of the other four. Noon started to mount but Will caught his arm and pulled him back. "Damn you, keep down."

He broke off a stalk of creosote brush from the hillside and touched a match to it. The tiny flames licked and writhed among the leaves, giving off black oily smoke, and when the branch was ablaze Will tossed it up on the wagon canvas. There was a brief yellow glow, the stench of charred fabric, and a section of the canvas gushed into flame. "You crazy?" Noon demanded. "They'll see that clear down the Colorado!"



"They sure will," Will said. "Give 'em something else to shoot at."

He scooped up a rock, shied it at the nearest mule and yelled. The mule jumped and then smelled smoke. The off mule gave a panicky snort and they both lit out. They went down the ridge at a dead run with the wagon bouncing crazily behind, spouting flame and sparks. In the moment he had to watch, it looked like the picture of a fiery chariot he'd seen long ago, a red-orange hell on wheels.

"Now!"

He gave Liza a boost into her saddle and swung onto his horse, perked its head around. Down the slope Indians were jumping from their draw, racing toward the runaway wagon to head it off, firing at it and yelling in confusion. They'd stop it eventually and cut the mules loose, round up the four loose horses too, but he'd caught them by surprise. These next few seconds were all he'd get. He rode the roan straight back up the ridge. He had a bad moment on the skyline, silhouetted in the twilight, but the Apaches were too disorganized to shoot effectively.

Then he was over the top and down the far slope, letting his horse pick its way across a steep fall of rocks. When he reached the first level stretch he peered back at the four riders tight behind him. They'd all gotten through. And now the ridge crest behind bristled with Indians, who realized they'd been tricked. A few let fly arrows but the range was too extreme. They wouldn't chase far on foot, Will knew. They'd go for their horses. Maybe a half hour till full dark.

He found a draw, followed it down to the flats. Not an Indian was in sight, on the ridge or anywhere, as though they'd melted back into the desert. Apparently they'd been so sure of the White Eyes they hadn't posted lookouts on this side. Will turned southwest, toward the canyon country of the Bill Williams, and kicked his tired roan into a run.

They covered some three miles before he slowed to a walk again, before the horses foundered. Night was closing in fast and stars began to appear. The ridge seemed far behind now, lost in gathering darkness. And for the first

time in hours he felt they had a chance to get clean away, south across the Williams and out of Apache territory. Then Liza called to him. "Will! My horse!"

Glancing back, he saw that the horse she rode, Chili's big black, was limping badly. He stopped and got down and lifted the black's left foreleg. It had thrown the shoe. In the country ahead, he knew, a horse minus a shoe would be crippled; these weren't flint-hoofed like the barefoot 'Pache ponies. The other four animals were too beat to carry double. So somebody would have to walk, unless he could find that shoe and hammer it back on with a rock.

He walked back along their trail some distance, searching. Then Andy shouted.

As his head snapped up, Will saw three Apaches bearing down on him. They seemed to ride out of nowhere, like shadows springing from the ground. The horse guards, he thought; they'd followed from that arroyo. And like the rankest pilgrim, he'd left his carbine on the roan.

He saw them and they were death, a whirlwind come to reap him, cut him down with lance and ax and knife and bow. He stood there, unable to move or think, in a stupor of exhaustion. Andy was screaming at him to run. A rifle boomed, but the three riders never faltered. They raced toward him, death in the thick clotting darkness, and he couldn't cry out a protest.

"Hang tight, boy! I'm comin'!"

Then Andy was riding past him, charging head-on, screeching like no Injun ever born. Andy with one of Noon's revolvers in one hand and his Sharps in the other. He fired once, fired twice more, the gun spitting flame, and an Apache toppled backward. He emptied the gun and hurled it at the other two as he smashed against them in a storm of dust and colliding horses.

"Andy!" Will found his voice. "Pull clear!"

Andy swung the rifle, clubbing and slashing, and the dust swirled up and hid all three. Will ran toward them. He was yelling at Andy, crazy incoherent things. He tripped, got up and ran on again, toward the dust that was boiling up like smoke. He raged at it, raged at Rett and Noon. Where

were they, goddam their yellow souls? Hang in there, Andy boy! Fight 'em off! Be lucky one more time. Don't let it happen to you now. Few more seconds and I'll be there to help.

A pony reared out of the dust and spilled its rider, who lay where he hit. The last Apache broke off the fight then, backed his pony away, and Will saw the black stain of blood across his chest. Lifting a hand to his wound, he stared at Will for an instant before he slumped and fell off his horse.

"Andy?"

The other horse, Andy's claybank, stood in the thinning dust, head down and blown, its saddle empty.

"Andy!"

Will took another dragging step or two, and saw him. He had fallen on his back and one hand still gripped the rifle barrel. He looked almost natural, like maybe he'd dropped off for a snooze, until Will sank to his knees. Slowly he touched the fingers clenched around the Sharps. He had to bend down close to see the knife in Andy's side, deep to the bone handle.

A thin stream of blood had trickled down his shirt to make a little gout on the ground. Not very much blood, a smallish spot that the first good wind would cover with blow sand. But it was Andy's life, all of it, poured out on the desert floor. Andrew Houston Colladay, twenty-nine years old, who wouldn't be going home to Texas after all.

He stared at the face and the black hawk eyes stared back at him. The rosebud mouth was twisted a bit, in the way a man will sometimes smile. Then the features blurred, the whole night blurred. Will pulled at the knife and it came with a sickening give. He raised it high, smashed it down on a rock, smashed it again, and there was a roaring in his ears that went on and on.

After a while Rett and Noon were there, peering around at the bodies of the Apaches. "By God," Noon breathed, "he downed all three!"

"He's done for too," Rett said. "Come on, Colladay. Let's light out of here."

Will looked up. "Get away from me."

They saw his eyes. They walked off. They left him alone.

Liza came up silently. He hoped she wouldn't say anything, and she didn't. She stood beside him—Andy's girl, Andy's almost-widow—and she was crying, so softly he could barely hear her. A breeze stirred across the flats, twisting in a sudden gust that stung his eyes with grit. He closed his eyes against it, against a sky bright with stars, and he felt the hot tears begin to flow.

The river bed was dry. The Bill Williams, which sometimes ran from bank to bank after spring melt in the upper mountains, was dry now. They climbed down to the narrow canyon bottom in early morning, and rode across a layer of baked, cracking mud which had been deposited by some by-gone flood. Out in the middle, where the earth looked softer, Will, Rett and Noon began to dig. They scooped with their hands and sharpened sticks of driftwood to enlarge the holes. At a depth of two feet they struck damp sand, but no water. Moving downstream, they tried again, while Liza searched along the banks for a pothole that might have trapped an overflow.

After an hour of this Will broke the point of his make-do shovel on a rock and threw it down in disgust. A hot arid wind was sifting up the canyon. In another hour, with the sun overhead, the heat down here would be intense. There must be water pockets somewhere under these tons of silt and gravel, but he hadn't time to hunt one out. The Apaches just might take a notion to trail them this far and finish off yesterday's chore. He gazed up at the cliffs which towered above the bottoms, and tried to swallow. His tongue felt like jerky. How long could a man go without water? A day? Another night? Did he shrivel up, all the juice cooked out of him? Or did the brain go first and fire him to a crazy fever? How was it to die of thirst?

"Rett," he called, "how much left?"

Rett glanced up with eyes that looked like bloodshot pebbles. "One canteen," he said, "and I'll shoot you if you touch it."

"That'll get us out of this canyon."

"You know any more waterholes—like this one?"

"I might," Will said. Liza was watching him too. He wished he hadn't told her that he'd never scouted south of the Williams. But Rett didn't know that yet. And what Rett didn't know would kill him someday. "Waste of time to dig here."

"I think you're lyin'," Rett said. "You don't know this country any better than I do."

"Go ahead and dig. But I'm heading south."

He turned and walked toward his horse. There was an itchy spot between his shoulder blades as big as a plate. He didn't believe Rett would shoot him in the back, but Rett had some Apache in his makeup. You never could be sure what the man might do.

The roan, nibbling salt brush along one bank, was all ribs and loose hide, and the other horses looked almost as scruffy. Nobody would ride much today. Will loosened the cinch strap, pulled the saddle off and dropped it in the sand. That forty pounds or so of extra weight could wear a tired horse down fast. He was ready to start when Rett and Noon left off digging and climbed out of their holes.

"The woman stays with us," Rett said.

Will looked from them to Liza. He saw how Rett meant to do this, get at him through Liza, and he was helpless. They had Liza, so they had him. "I'll be back," he told her.

She barely nodded. "Yes."

"We'll be waiting." Rett tossed two empty canteens at his feet. "Right here. Me and her and Ollie. So you better find some water quick."

"How soon is quick?"

"Till dark," Rett said. "You be here by dark."

Will picked up the canteens, got his carbine from the saddle boot and turned up canyon, leading the roan on foot. He didn't let himself think of last night, of Andy lying back yonder under a mound of rocks. He had to think of Liza now, and only Liza—how to get her out of here. That was the one last thing he could do for Andy.

Within half a mile he came to a break in the canyon wall and began the long climb to the rim. For a while he con-

sidered the possibility of doubling back from above, to a point where he might cover Rett and Noon with the Sharps. But Rett would be expecting some sort of try, be ready for him. The risk to Liza was too great. He doubted if he had the strength to go crawling around these cliffs like a human fly. And even if he did, what then? Where would they be without water? He had to find water first.

About mid-morning he rimmed out, staggered up the final pitch of loose slippery rock, and flopped down to rest. To the west he saw the green belt of the Colorado, surprisingly near, and the brown ribbon of the river itself. In a very little while he could be down there wallowing in water, swimming in it, a whole river of water. There were no garden patches or Mojave *rancherías* that he could tell. A drop of saliva trickled down his scratchy throat and he forced himself to look away.

Southward the country leveled out between two high ridges, which were covered with more vegetation than he'd seen in days—greasewood, mesquite, saguaro, ocotillo. Growth in the Sonoran zone didn't always mean water. But he had one faint clue. A Cocopah once had told him a long forgotten custom of the ancient peoples, the Old Ones, who inhabited the Colorado Basin centuries before the first Spaniards came. During the years of the Great Drought the Old Ones had marked the trails to certain all-year springs by cutting off the tops of saguaro cactus. Find one of these topped saguaros, so the legend went, and you'd found a signpost to water.

The desert was full of such tales, about lost silver lodes and buried mission treasure. Some went so far as to claim that Montezuma's gold hoard was hidden hereabouts. Will had heard them all, and was properly skeptical. But over in Papago country one summer, for a ten-dollar bet, he'd proved out the saguaro yarn. He'd tracked down a spring. So it could be done. But he'd done it then with a full canteen, a fresh horse and a cavalry patrol along for the sport.

He mounted the roan and, riding bare, started down toward the nearer ridge. There were ancient foot trails all through this country, worn by the passage of countless feet,

threadlike scars that had connected the old Indian encampments. His best hope of finding one was to follow the natural terrain. Several times in the next hour he stopped, dismounted and examined the ground. Finally, near a big boulder, he picked up several flakes of black, glassy obsidian chips. The Old Ones had been here, possibly made dry camp, and left some broken tool or spearhead, for obsidian was not native to these parts.

A dim pale path, a few inches wide and barely discernible, wandered off into the brush. With a flicker of excitement he rode on. Twice he lost the trail and had to quarter back and forth to locate it again. Eventually it led him close to the base of the ridge, where steep bluffs jutted up into crags. Then his eyes narrowed. Just ahead grew a tall, oddly disfigured saguaro.

The trunk, fluted like some green Greek column, rose twenty feet to the first branching arms and stopped. The upper part had been cut off and never grown back, leaving a headless freak, a kind of decapitated giant that stood out against the forest of other saguaros. As he rode up a bird fluttered out of a hole high in the trunk and winged off with angry squawks. How old this plant might be, or how an Indian had shinnied up to that height over the wicked down-curving spikes, he couldn't guess. But there was no trace of water here.

Bitter disappointment closed over him. It was almost noon. He could not hunt much farther and return to the canyon before dark. And then he saw another topped saguaro in the distance. This led him to a third, and eventually a fourth, a mile beyond the first, but there the trail ended. The country ahead was more empty plain.

He slid off his horse, feeling the dead silence of the place, an eerie sensation that people had lived here once. A broken *metate* lay in the sand. The flat-topped boulder near by was pocked with smooth round holes where the women of these bygone dwellers had sat and gossiped and ground their mesquite beans into flour. He picked up a tiny arrowhead, so small it could have been used only to hunt birds. A few steps farther on he came face to face with a huge

split rock covered with petroglyphs. On its weathered face some artist had chiseled the crude outlines of a bighorn sheep, antelope, snakes, the figures of men and symbols of the rising sun. He stared at the designs, trying to decipher their message. Where there had been so much life, there must have been water in abundance.

The next rock had a single carving, an arrow pointing toward the ridge, toward a cove deep under the cliffs. Panting, stumbling into the brush, Will ran. If there ever had been a trail it was long since overgrown. Mesquite thorns raked his face and ripped his shirt. Bulling his way through the tangle, suddenly he broke into a canyon so narrow that he could touch either wall by stretching out his arms. He stopped and peered around. The air seemed moist against his burning skin. Fresh animal tracks criss-crossed the wet sand under his feet and a swarm of bees made the silence hum.

Slowly he crawled between the roots of a gnarled *palo verde* and into the mouth of a shallow cave, green with ferns. From the roof, water drip-dropped steadily into a sandstone basin, forming a wide deep pool. For a moment he looked down into the depths. He didn't have to sample it to know the water would be sweet and fresh. Somehow this grotto seemed a miracle, a kind of wayside desert shrine. And he thought maybe he understood what that artist of the Old Ones had been trying to say on his picture rock.

He wasn't a praying man. But there on his knees, beside the dark still pool, he did pray, before he put his mouth to water.

In the canyon of the Bill Williams the morning grew hotter as the sun rayed down. The bottoms shimmered with heat waves. Ollie Noon left off digging and mopped a sleeve across his face. His hands were bloody from clawing at sand and gravel. If he only had a shovel, Noon told himself. The water was down there, but he couldn't reach it with his hands. Craziest river he'd ever heard of—all the water underground.



Rett had stopped digging some while ago and crawled into the shade of a ledge, where he sat with a canteen and his rifle, watching the opposite cliff. Noon stripped off his shirt and walked over to him. "Drink."

Rett shook his head. "I just gave you one."

"A swallow, Mase. That's all I'm askin'."

"You don't get another drop till Colladay comes back. Nobody does."

"Colladay?" Noon kneaded his throat. "He won't come back now. He'll keep on goin'."

"He'll be back," Rett said. "For the woman."

"But what if he don't?"

"Get your mind off water, Ollie. Gonna be a long hot day."

Noon moved on to the rock where Liza was sitting. He stood over her, waiting for her to turn those cold green eyes on him, but she didn't glance up, didn't move. She didn't even seem like a woman any more. She might have been part of the rock. He knew that somehow she had beaten him, no matter what he did to her. He was nothing to her. He felt the blood surge into his face and he said, "I'll kill him if he comes back. Right before your eyes, I'll do it, you froze-up bitch."

Returning to the ledge, he crawled in beside Rett. Rett grinned and said, "Guess you ain't a ladies' man."

Noon scowled and slid his hat down over his eyes. Maybe he could sleep, forget how long since he'd had a decent drink. He wished he was back in the Tennessee hills, where the creeks ran full all year. He wished he'd never let Mase talk him into this fool trip. But Mase couldn't resist that reward, that two thousand dollars from the Army. And now they'd lost it, lost Andy Colladay, to a bunch of stinking Apaches. They'd gone through all this hell for nothing.

He thought of El Monte. Right now he could be there, with a different woman every night, women eager to shine up to Ollie Noon. He thought of the *olla* hanging under his *ramada*, full of fresh cold water. Water. One of the horses stamped and his stomach went queasy, as he re-

membered Will's talk of drinking horse blood. How would a slug of that go down? Then he remembered another tale, about a man trapped on the desert who drank his own pee. And there sat Mase, nursing that canteen.

"Just one little sip, Mase. Please!"

"No."

"I gotta have some water, Mase!"

Rett squinted at him through half-closed eyes. Noon went shivery all over, thinking how Rett had shot the old Mojave in the back. Noon had been scared then, and he'd been scared of the Apaches yesterday, but not like he was now. Rett would shoot him too, if he made a move toward the canteen. He saw it in those cat eyes. Rett would kill for money, or for a pint of water. Friends or partners, Rett would kill him sure. All of a sudden he wanted to blubber. It wasn't fair, to be so god-awful thirsty.

"You talk too much, Ollie."

Noon brushed a hand over his eyes. He didn't have to beg, not Ollie Noon. He knew where there was plenty of water. Rett and his gun couldn't stop him. A sly smile came to his mouth as he stood up.

"Where you going now?"

"You'll see."

He hurried to the horses and threw a leg over his gray. Rett sat up, staring at him. "Get outta that sun," Rett called. "You'll have a fit."

Noon headed the gray down canyon and spurred to a run. Rett was shouting for him to come back. He heard Rett's voice echoing off the canyon walls, "Ollie—Ollie—Ollie—" and then a bend cut off the sound.

"I'll get me a drink," he said. "And I won't give *you* a drop, you stingy bastard."

He laughed as he pushed the gray along. He'd like to see Rett's face. He'd fooled him good. Rett could have the woman, Colladay's woman and Colladay's ranch. Rett could have it all, if he lived that long. But Ollie Noon was the smart one. No buzzards were going to pick *his* bones in any canyon.

The horse was clattering over the rocks, laboring whenever they came to sand, and he drove in the spurs. The gray put on a burst of speed and then slowed again. The river couldn't be much farther. Just around the next bend or two. But when he hit another stretch of deep sand the horse gave a shuddery sigh and fell under him.

Noon got clear of the stirrups. He booted the gray a few times and hauled on the reins, then tried to tail it up, but the horse rolled over on one side. Raving and swearing, he pulled a gun. He didn't need a horse. Once he reached the Colorado he'd make a reed raft and float down to Yuma. Leave this one for the 'Paches. He shot the gray between the eyes, watching blood well up, and shot twice more. Echoes bounced back and forth across the canyon. Shouldering his rifle, Noon walked on.

But the going afoot was harder than he'd expected. Sand dragged at his boots. After a while he threw away the Sharps. He didn't need a rifle either, not when he had his gun.

The canyon kept winding and twisting, but pretty soon it had to enter the Colorado. He broke into a trot. He ran until the stitch in his side grew so bad he had to stop. Panting and gasping for breath, he sat down and pulled off his britches, tossed them on a rock. In the heat they seemed to bind his legs. When he went on again he was stripped down to his hat, boots, underdrawers and gun belt.

Travel light, he thought. That's how to beat this country. He was talking out loud to himself now. You'll make it, Ollie. One more bend. Don't stop now. Water just ahead. Keep going, Ollie. All the water you can drink. Water, water everywhere—

He passed the mouth of a side canyon, climbing over the boulders that had washed down in wetter years. His footing wasn't so sure any more, he kept weaving from side to side and stumbling over rocks, or maybe it was the sun, playing tricks on his eyes. He blinked them rapidly several times. When he looked once more he saw the green band of the Colorado not far ahead.

**"Mirage," he said. "Can't fool Ollie Noon."**

He blinked again but the river was still there, the great chocolate river beyond the trees. He could smell the wetness of it. He staggered to a cottonwood and leaned against the trunk. No Mojaves in sight. That had just been more of Colladay's scare talk. Anyway no damn Injun could keep him from water now.

He ran toward the bank, through the tangle of trees and clawing brush. A branch ripped off his hat but he didn't stop. He tripped and fell and got up and lumbered on, through the mud and bank-side tules. Water was so close he could feel it sliding down his throat. He broke through the last undergrowth and flung himself down beside the river, half in and half out. He drank until his belly hurt, drank until he puked, and then he drank some more. When he finally got to his feet he felt like a cow with the heaves.

Some faint sound, above the river's murmur, made him glance back over his shoulder. Six or seven Indians stood staring at him from the reeds. Mojaves, they were, with their tattooed noses and bird-nest topknots. Slowly he faced around. More of them came slipping out of the brush and stopped in a semicircle, watching him, twenty or thirty. Noon's hand inched toward his gun, feeling for the butt. Frantically he fingered the empty holster and looked down. Both holsters were empty.

Somewhere he'd lost the gun. When he fell that last time, or the time before, it must've jarred loose. He didn't have a gun. The Mojaves knew it too. They didn't yell or jabber or shake their bows, but they were closing in on him, squeezing up the circle. He backed off a step, to the edge of the bank, and the terror was bile in his throat.

**"Keep off, you hear! Leave me be!"**

They were closer now, making no sound in the mud. He backed off into the water, back another step, up to his knees, and tripped in a pothole. The current caught him, spun him out toward midstream. He tried to swim but his boots were full of water, his mouth was full of water. He couldn't breathe for all the water. The river sucked him down.

Just before dark Will rode back down the canyon floor with two canteens. He was so exhausted he fell getting off his horse. Ollie Noon was gone, nobody knew where, but Liza was there. Liza, and Rett, waiting under the cliffs beside the other two horses. He gave them water, told about the spring he'd found. Tomorrow he would take them there. Since no Apaches had come during the day they'd be safe here tonight. They'd wait that long for Noon. Two minutes later he was asleep against a rock.

The warbling of a canyon wren wakened him early. He yawned and peered around for Rett, then sat up abruptly. The horses were gone, and Rett with them.

"Will." Liza came to him out of the gray light that filtered down between the walls. "He took the horses about an hour ago. And all the canteens. To look for Noon."

Will nodded. Rett knew they wouldn't try to get away from him on foot. Rett had them as he'd always had them, at his mercy. "It's not far to the spring," he told her. "We'll rest there a day or two."

"How much farther to Fort Yuma?"

"Almost halfway." That was a guess. But he knew now he could find other waterholes along the route. Where there was water there'd be game of some kind—meat; they wouldn't starve. From here south to the Gila they'd be free of Indians. And the Gila was the back door to Yuma, patrolled by the Army. "We'll get through."

"You could go now," she said. "Make it alone. Rett would never find you."

"Just tip my hat, say, 'Good morning, ma'am'? Walk out and leave you?"

"You told me once I'd be sorry I ever left Nigger Alley. I'm not. For other things, yes, but not that."

"You want to go back there? The Red Ox and all the rest?"

"I can always take in washing." She smiled faintly and then her eyes sobered. "They'll arrest you at Yuma, won't they?"

"Likely send me back to Los Angeles for trial."

"But what about your ranch?"

"The ranch?" He shook his head. "I gambled on it. And I lost. Like you gambled on Andy."

She sat beside him on the rock, her face in shadow, and they fell silent watching the narrow slit of sky above begin to pale. But they weren't alone, not even now. Andy was there between them, Andy with his lopsided grin and whooping laugh. Andy was everywhere around them, all the different Andy's they had known.

"You think about him all the time, don't you?" Liza said. Will looked down at her.

"Blaming yourself, hating yourself. You shouldn't. Would you rather he'd been hanged?"

"I got him into this, that's what I can't forget."

"You didn't murder that Union officer. Andy did. Maybe I sound heartless, but I loved Andy too, or thought so. Once I'd have done anything for him. But he couldn't help being Andy Colladay."

"He always wanted to be—somebody. Big. Important. Maybe if I'd helped him more—"

"He didn't need more help from you. All his life you did for him. Almost the last thing he said to me was: 'I'll show him.' "

"Show me what?"

"That he was big—somebody. And he was, Will. At the end he proved it. He did the biggest thing any man can do."

"I don't know, Liza. He was set on reaching Texas, fighting for the South. And he never got to fire a shot."

"He died like a soldier, a brave one," she said quietly. "Isn't that how you'd like to remember him?"

He stood up and looked away from her across the canyon. The wren skimmed by with a twig in its beak and a chuckawalla crawled from the brush. A pink glow touched the rims above, creeping down the cliff. Air was beginning to stir before the coming heat like some live thing.

"Will."

He turned. She slipped from the rock and came toward him with her face lifted up. Her eyes, dark and wide and pleading, fixed on his. "Hold me, Will. Just once, hold me. Before they come back. I'm so deathly sick of being afraid!"

She came against him, face pressed to his shirt, and his arms circled tight around her, gripping hard. He felt the trembling of her shoulders, the soft give and warmth of her, and her hair brushing his face. She clung to him, quiet after a while, until they heard the tramp of horses down-canyon.

Her body stiffened and she stepped back from him quickly. "That's Rett now."

Will took her hand for a second. They didn't have much to go back to, either of them—jail and a job dealing faro. He'd lost the only two things that counted for much in his life, Andy and the ranch. But out here somewhere he'd found Liza Kincaid.

"He hates you, Will. He'll do anything! He's just waiting till he feels safe."

"I'm waiting too," Will said. "But not much longer."

Rett rode slowly up the bottoms, hazing the two horses in front of him, but without Ollie Noon. He came directly to them. His face was gray as dust.

"Find anything?"

"I found his horse," Rett said. "Shot between the eyes. Farther down I found his rifle."

"Near the river?"

"Two, three miles below here. But his tracks went on."

Will looked up at him. Chili was gone. Andy was gone. And now Noon. He didn't say it. Rett knew. The knowledge was bleak and bitter in Rett's eyes. Whatever Noon had found down toward the Colorado, he wouldn't be coming back. A man who shot his horse and threw away his weapon in this country was beyond helping. One way or another the desert had done with Ollie Noon. Of the six who'd left El Monte three were left. And a hundred miles or more to Fort Yuma.

"Let's go," Rett said.

They each had a swig of water and gave the rest to the horses. In the bright brassy dawn Will led Liza and Rett out of the canyon of the Bill Williams and up to the rims. One more crossing, he told himself—next would be the Gila. Walking and riding by turns, to spare the limping

black, he led them the way he'd traveled yesterday, down between the ridges and along the saguaro trail. He didn't glance back. Rett would be there, close behind, with the rifle across one arm and a gun in his belt. Rett couldn't wait much longer either.

By mid-morning they reached the old Indian campsite and the picture rock, but the cove back under the cliffs was still in shadow. Smelling water, the horses whinnied and pricked up their ears. Will got off slowly. This had to be the time and place. He'd decided that when he first found the spring, before he knew Ollie Noon was missing. Now, with only Rett, it should be easier, one man instead of two. If he timed it to the second, if Rett didn't get suspicious—If, if if.

He took a deep breath and pointed to the brush. All through the morning he'd thought this out, how it was going to be, and what he had to do. Now. In the next few minutes. He'd never have a second chance. "Back in there," he said. "'Bout a hundred yards."

"Go ahead," Rett said. He shifted the rifle muzzle an inch or two toward Liza.

"Too brushy to ride. We'll have to lead the horses in."

Rett hesitated. Between them Liza sat motionless and silent. "Leave that carbine here."

Will shrugged and leaned the Sharps against a rock. "You want a drink or not? That spring's ice cold."

"Fill the canteens first. Get the horses later." Rett nodded at Liza. "We'll wait here for you."

"Maybe you'll wait. The horses won't."

"Damn you!" Rett fired into the dirt at his feet. "Go bring some water!"

Will picked up the canteens. He hadn't told Liza. It was better that she didn't know. But this was the last time he'd leave her alone with Rett, the last and the worst.

He turned from her and climbed over the rocks and disappeared into the brush. He trampled heavily through the mesquite and greasewood, scaring up a wild burro with his racket. His legs were so shaky he had to stop. Halfway to



the spring he cached the three empty canteens under a pack rat's nest, then pushed on into the canyon mouth. After the sunlight it seemed cool and dark in here, dark enough so that shapes lost their clarity. There'd be no direct light until much later in the day, and then only for minutes. Rett would get thirsty before then.

Crossing to the pool, he had a long drink. Then he backed away and brushed out his prints in the sand. He climbed up in the *palo verde* and edged out on a branch to the crack in the rock that he'd examined yesterday. It angled up the face of the cliff and fractured out into several narrow fissures, where brush had taken root and sprouted with surprising density. The second rothold above him looked barely wide enough to conceal a skinny man. A man who could lie for hours, if he had to, and not move a muscle.

Inching his way up the crack, he crawled out over space to the ledge he'd chosen. Fifteen feet straight below the pool shimmered in its basin. He'd known a Mescalero Apache who waited two days by a spring, without food or water, to ambush an enemy. Will squeezed down behind the fringe of brush and eased into position, careful not to dislodge any twigs or debris. He unsheathed his knife.

You have the rifle. I have the water. Come and get it, Rett.

He waited. He listened to the drip of water in the cave, and tried to gauge how much time had passed. Maybe twenty minutes. Rett would be waiting too, out under the sun, getting edgy now and hotter by the second. Rett would wonder for a while and then he'd realize his fix.

"Hurry up, Colladay!" The shout sounded faint and far-off. "Where's that water?"

Will raised his head a bit. The tall thick growth of the canyon mouth screened him from Rett and Liza. He could see only a few feet into it, but he could hear every sound.

"You come out!" Rett yelled. "Or I'm comin' after you. With the woman!"

Will pressed his cheek back against the rock. The silence built up again, but it wasn't a total silence. Bees droned

back and forth, and the undergrowth stirred with furtive rustlings. On the cliff above a dry yucca stalk rattled in the wind. A hummingbird hovered over the pool on thrumming wings, dipped in its bill and flew off.

"You hear me, Colladay? Sing out!"

Will ran his thumb over the knife blade, feeling the fresh-honed edge. He was sweating now, cold sweat. An ant crawled across his neck and down under his shirt into his armpit, where he couldn't reach without turning. Wait. Don't twist. Don't move. Let it crawl. Wait.

He watched a horned toad hop across the sand below. Off in the brush somewhere a cricket hummed. He counted to sixty. How long was a minute? How long since he'd left them by the picture rock? An hour? It must be noon. Out there in the full sun it would seem all day. Come to water, Rett. And bring her with you.

A stick crackled, leather scraped on rock. Then Liza came into sight, pushing slowly through the brush. Two steps behind Rett held the rifle at her back. She moved toward the cliff, to the foot of the *palo verde*, and stumbled over its roots. Rett ordered her to stop.

"He isn't here," she cried. "Something's happened to him!"

"Don't play-act with me," Rett said. "You two cooked this up."

Rett peered about into the brush, ahead at the dark arch of the cave. He looked up at the cliffs and down at the sand. Then he prodded her spine with the rifle barrel. "No tracks. Go on."

Liza staggered to the edge of the pool. She knelt down and reached out her hands.

Watching from above, Will gripped the knife. Now you, Rett. Just a little closer. A few more steps. Or would he hold back, wolf-wary, sucking on his teeth? How much could he stand? Would he belly down and guzzle, like any thirsty animal? The body, they said, was ninety per cent water. How many quarts had Mase Rett sweated off the last few days?

Rett stared at the pool and his breath came fast and

shallow. He ran forward. With a grunt he was on his knees, on his stomach, flat out, face plunged deep in water. The rifle lay unguarded beside him on the sand.

Will jumped. He landed among the ferns with a jolt that shook his teeth. With another spring he hit Rett's back with both knees and straddled him. He buried his left hand in Rett's hair and jerked. His knife hand slashed up to the Adam's apple. Back arched, arms straining, Rett gathered his body, then felt the steel at his throat and went rigid.

"How's the water, Rett? Had enough?"

Rett made a gurgling noise. He squirmed a little, stopped when Will pressed harder. "I'm goin' to kill you, Rett. Leave you here. Like Andy. With a knife in your neck."

"Will, for God's sake—"

"Don't beg! Andy didn't beg." He felt the neck cords quiver under his hand. One rip through soft flesh to the windpipe, instant painless death. He'd seen how Apaches did it. One slice and twist. But he wasn't an Apache. His hands shook, his whole body shook, and the drip-drip of water in the cave boomed like thunder. This man under him would have killed Andy, would've shot Liza in the back. But he couldn't do it this way, couldn't slit his throat. Some dark age-old instinct in him recoiled.

"Will, the ranch! Listen. I'll tear up your note! I'll—"

He shoved Rett's head back down in the water, held it there. He felt Liza's eyes, though he didn't look at her. She was the one who'd told him he couldn't kill. "Get his rifle."

She crept over beside him and picked up the Sharps, and her skirt made a faint rustle as she moved. He let go his grip of Rett then, stood up and took the rifle from her. Rett backed away from the pool on all fours, gasping and shaking water out of his eyes. Will cocked the hammer. Can't drown him. Can't shoot him. Can't kick a whipped dog when he's down. It's too late for Andy.

"Stand up."

Rett made one try and fell, then got to his feet. His chest was heaving and water ran off him in puddles.

"Gun belt."

Rett fumbled at the buckle with trembling fingers until he worked it loose. His revolver and belt dropped to the sand.

Will kicked them to one side. "You had your drink. Go water your horse. I'll give you one full canteen."

Rett rubbed his throat with both hands.

"I'm givin' you half a chance," Will said. "More than you'd give anybody else."

"Chance?" Rett's voice cracked. "What chance?"

"To make Fort Yuma on your own. Now git!"

Ten minutes later he stood with Liza in the old Indian camp while Rett tightened his cinch and mounted the horse. Rett tied his canteen to the saddle. He stared down at Will, at the rifle across Will's arm, and Will stared back at him. In the fierce noon sun his skin looked yellow, like old newspaper.

"You're not doing me any favor," Rett said. "You figure I won't make it."

"I hope you collect that reward in hell."

"I'll get through. I'll be there. At Yuma. Waiting for you."

Rett touched spurs to his horse and reined away. He rode at a slow walk, head down against the sun, kicking up little puffs of dust. Will watched him dwindle across the flats to the south. Finally he had to squint to make out the tiny black figure and then Mase Rett was gone, lost in the blazing land.

A face appeared at the barred opening in the guardhouse door and keys rattled. Will swung his feet to the floor and got off the bunk.

"Colladay?"

"That's me."

The door opened. A soldier with a Springfield stood outside in the twilight. "Come on then. Captain wants you."

Will stepped out of his cell onto Fort Yuma's parade and fell in between two guards. Retreat had sounded hours ago and the bare quadrangle of 'dobe barracks and warehouses were deserted. He glanced up at the flagpole, then straight-

ened his shoulders and marched across to the HQ building. From the *ramada* he could see the Colorado and over on the far shore a few scattered lights of Arizona City. A stern-wheeler was tied up at her slip opposite the bluff.

Maybe, he thought, they'll send me back by sea. In irons.

By Wingfield was alone in his temporary office, scowling at a litter of papers on the desk. He dismissed the guards and shut the door. Tamping tobacco into his pipe, he puffed on it furiously while he studied Will through the smoke. "Six days you've been here now," he said. "A few more and you'll look half human. How you made it through that desert I'll never know."

"I was lucky."

"Lucky? The good Lord must've led you by the hand. When you came through the gate out there"—Wingfield shook his head—"dragging that woman on a lame horse—"

Will stared at the lamp. He didn't want to talk about that journey from the springs. Or think about it. He'd brought her to safety, somehow. But he hadn't been allowed to see her since his arrest.

"Remarkable woman, Mrs. Kincaid," Wingfield said. "Quite an admirer of yours too."

"You can't hold her as a prisoner, By. She's been through enough for ten women."

"The Army has a long memory, Will. It doesn't forget its own. And this, in case *you've* forgotten, is still wartime."

"Andy's dead," Will said grimly. "You've got me. What more do you want? Let her go."

"Yes, I've got you." Wingfield smiled dryly and tapped some papers on the desk. "Dispatches arrived an hour ago. That's what I've been waiting for."

Will watched him pace back and forth across the office. In a minute now he'd know. Trial for treason, aiding an enemy. Friendship wouldn't sway By Wingfield a hairline from his duty.

"News is bad. The Texans are pushing west from Rio del Norte. That's no longer just a rumor. Apaches are out all over New Mexico and Arizona. We haven't a loyal garrison left between here and Santa Fe. You know what'll

happen if the Rebs grab all that country?"

"They'll close the Colorado."

"We'll lose California!" The captain swung around on him. "How'd you like to go back to scouting for our side?"

"What?"

"Listen, my bull-necked friend. Colonel Carleton is organizing a California Column. Eighteen hundred men. We'll strike east to hit the Rebs head-on. We've got to hold. But we can't without a few scouts who know the territory. Like you."

"No!"

"It's your war now, Will. It's everybody's war. Nobody's neutral. Time's come when a man has to stand up and be counted."

"You mean you'll turn me loose?"

"Under military control. If you sign an agreement to serve for the duration of hostilities. The Army makes its share of blunders, but sometimes it can be human. General Sumner, on my recommendation, feels that your brother—Well, let's say Andy paid his debt in full."

"What if I don't?"

Wingfield gave him another wintry smile. "In that event—and a shameful waste it would be—I can promise that you'll sit out the war in a stockade. One that's escape-proof."

Will turned to the window. A last faint purple afterglow still touched the river, the desert beyond and the far mountain silhouettes. As he watched, darkness fell quickly, almost like a curtain, shutting out the past. "California Column, you said?"

"Your war, Will," Wingfield said quietly. "Your country. You fought for it once. Think about that."

"Get me a pen."

Afterward, when he'd signed the document and shaken Wingfield's hand, the captain handed him two papers. One was a quit claim deed to a portion of the Flores Grant, his ranch. The other was his note for four thousand dollars, with a list of supplies attached. Wingfield was grinning at him broadly. "Never mind how I got these. I won't need

'em for evidence now. But you might be needing some land after the war."

Will had to clear his throat to speak. He said huskily, "Rett? Did you arrest him too?"

"Not exactly. A patrol ran across him today. North of here. What was left of him."

"He's dead? Mase Rett's dead?"

Wingfield nodded. "His horse must've played out. He'd thrown away his clothes, canteen, everything. The sergeant who found him said he'd never seen so many buzzards. And not a mile from the river."

"A mile from the river?" Will swallowed. A moth thudded against the lamp chimney. Outside he could hear the slap of a sentry's boots along the duckboards. Slowly he tore up the papers. "By, I need a drink."

"I've got some local tanglefoot in my quarters."

"No thanks," Will said. "Water."

Later, after Wingfield had given him directions and shaken hands again, Will went out into the night and through the Yuma gate. Tonight he was free. Tomorrow he'd report back at reveille for duty. This frontier Army might not be spit-and-polish regulation, but it held a man to his bargain.

He climbed down the bluff to the river's edge and turned south along the wagon road. A short walk brought him to the settlement at the ferry crossing, a cluster of shanties and stores known as Jaegerville. It had doubled in size since his last visit, swollen by the war boom. The single dusty street swarmed with soldiers, teamsters, Mexicans muffled in serapes despite the heat, Yuma and Cocopah crews off the river boats. But he remembered the place on the corner—The Shoofly.

The long low room was jammed and blue to the ceiling with smoke. It wasn't the Red Ox. No piano player, no mahogany bar. But it smelled like any other deadfall, of alcohol and sweat and rank cigars. He pushed through the crowd and past the monte tables to the faro layout. She was there, dealing before a tight-packed ring of men, in a dress ten shades redder than her hair.

He waited some time before she glanced up. Her eyes widened. Color came into her face, then a slow uncertain smile. "Sorry, gentlemen," Liza said. "No more bets." She put down her cards and stepped around the table toward him. Together they walked out of The Shoofly into the street.

"Didn't take you long to find a job," he said.

"Will! Oh, Will. You're out! What happened?"

"Got a job myself," he said. "Starting tomorrow. Thirteen dollars a month." He took her by the arm and steered her toward the river, toward the darkness under the trees.

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